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FANTASY FICTION

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BEYOND FANTASY FICTION

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The wall

By THEODORE R. COGSWELL

Illustrated by SUSSMAN



THE Wall that went all the way around the World had always been there, so nobody paid much attention to it—except Porgie.

Porgie was going to find out what was on the other side of it

—assuming there was another side—or break his neck trying. He was going on fourteen, an age that tends to view the word *impossible* as a meaningless term invented by adults for their own peculiar purposes. But he recognized that

around the world

It was black, shiny, a thousand feet high.

Inside, of course, was the world. Outside?

Porgie rode his broomstick and wondered . . .



there were certain practical difficulties involved in scaling a glassy-smooth surface that rose over a thousand feet straight up. That's why he spent a lot of time watching the eagles.

This morning, as usual, he was

late for school. He lost time finding a spot for his broomstick in the crowded rack in the school yard, and it was exactly six minutes after the hour as he slipped guiltily into the classroom.

For a moment, he thought he

was safe. Old Mr. Wickens had his back to him and was chalking a pentagram on the blackboard.

But just as Porgie started to slide into his seat, the schoolmaster turned and drawled, "I see Mr. Shirey has finally decided to join us."

THE class laughed, and Porgie flushed.

"What's your excuse this time, Mr. Shirey?"

"I was watching an eagle," said Porgie lamely.

"How nice for the eagle. And what was he doing that was of such great interest?"

"He was riding up on the wind. His wings weren't flapping or anything. He was over the box canyon that runs into the East wall, where the wind hits the Wall and goes up. The eagle just floated in circles, going higher all the time. You know, Mr. Wickens, I'll bet if you caught a whole bunch of eagles and tied ropes to them, they could lift you right up to the top of the wall!"

"That," said Mr. Wickens, "is possible—if you could catch the eagles. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll continue with the lecture. When invoking Elementals of the Fifth Order, care must be taken to . . ."

Porgie glazed his eyes and began to think up ways and means to catch some eagles.

The next period, Mr. Wickens gave them a problem in Practical Astrology. Porgie chewed his pencil and tried to work on it, but couldn't concentrate. Nothing came out right—and when he found he had accidentally transposed a couple of signs of the zodiac at the very beginning, he gave up and began to draw plans for eagle traps. He tried one, decided it wouldn't work, started another—

"Porgie!"

He jumped. Mr. Wickens, instead of being in front of the class, was standing right beside him. The schoolmaster reached down, picked up the paper Porgie had been drawing on, and looked at it. Then he grabbed Porgie by the arm and jerked him from his seat.

"Go to my study!"

As Porgie went out the door, he heard Mr. Wickens say, "The class is dismissed until I return!"

There was a sudden rush of large, medium, and small-sized boys out of the classroom. Down the corridor to the front door they pelted, and out into the bright sunshine. As they ran past Porgie, his cousin Homer skidded to a stop and accidentally on purpose jabbed an elbow into his ribs. Homer, usually called "Bull Pup" by the kids because of his squat build and pugnacious face, was a year older than Porgie and took his seniority seriously.

"Wait'll I tell Dad about this. You'll catch it tonight!" He gave Porgie another jab and then ran out into the schoolyard to take command of a game of Warlock.

MR. Wickens unlocked the door to his study and motioned Porgie inside. Then he shut and locked it carefully behind him. He sat down in the high-backed chair behind his desk and folded his hands.

Porgie stood silently, hanging his head, filled with that helpless guilty anger that comes from conflict with superior authority.

"What were you doing instead of your lesson?" Mr. Wickens demanded.

Porgie didn't answer.

Mr. Wickens narrowed his eyes. The large hazel switch that rested on top of the bookcase beside the stuffed owl lifted lightly into the air, drifted across the room, and dropped into his hand.

"Well?" he said, tapping the switch on the desk.

"Eagle traps," admitted Porgie. "I was drawing eagle traps. I couldn't help it. The Wall made me do it."

"Proceed."

Porgie hesitated for a moment. The switch tapped. Porgie burst out, "I want to see what's on the other side! There's no magic that will get me over, so I've got to find something else!"

Tap went the switch. "Something else?"

"If a magic way was in the old books, somebody would have found it already!"

Mr. Wickens rose to his feet and stabbed one bony finger accusingly at Porgie. "Doubt is the mother of damnation!"

Porgie dropped his eyes to the floor and wished he was someplace else.

"I see doubt in you. Doubt is evil, Porgie, *evil!* There are ways permitted to men and ways forbidden. You stand on the brink of the fatal choice. Beware that the Black Man does not come for you as he did for your father before you. Now, bend over!"

Porgie bent. He wished he'd worn a heavier pair of pants.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes, sir," said Porgie sadly.

Mr. Wickens raised the switch over his head. Porgie waited. The switch slammed—but on the desk.

"Straighten up," Mr. Wickens said wearily. He sat down again. "I've tried pounding things into your head and I've tried pounding things on your bottom, and one end is as insensitive as the other. Porgie, can't you understand that you aren't supposed to try and find out new things? The Books contain everything there is to know. Year by year, what is written in them becomes clearer to us."



HE pointed out the window at the distant towering face of the Wall that went around the World. "Don't worry about what is on the other side of that! It may be a place of angels or a place of demons—the Books do not tell us. But no man will know until he is ready for that knowledge. Our broomsticks won't climb that high, our charms aren't strong enough. We need more skill at magic, more understanding of the strange unseen forces that surround us. In my grandfather's time, the best of the broomsticks wouldn't climb over a hundred feet in the air. But the Adepts in the Great Tower worked and worked until now, when the clouds are low, we can ride right up among them. Someday we will be able to soar all the way to the top of the Wall—"

"Why not now?" Porgie asked stubbornly. "With eagles."

"Because we're not *ready*," Mr. Wickens snapped. "Look at mind-talk. It was only thirty years ago that the proper incantations were worked out, and even now there are only a few who have the skill to talk across the miles by just thinking out their words. Time, Porgie—it's going to take time. We were placed here to learn the Way, and everything that might divert us from the search is evil. Man can't walk two roads at once. If he tries, he'll split himself in half."

"Maybe so," said Porgie. "But birds get over the Wall and they don't know any spells. Look, Mr. Wickens, if everything is magic, how come magic won't work on everything? Like this, for instance—"

He took a shiny quartz pebble out of his pocket and laid it on the desk.

Nudging it with his finger, he said:

*"Stone fly,
Rise on high,
Over cloud
And into sky."*

The stone didn't move.

"You see, sir? If words work on broomsticks, they should work on stones, too."

Mr. Wickens stared at the stone. Suddenly it quivered and jumped into the air.

"That's different," said Porgie. "You took hold of it with your mind. Anybody can do that with little things. What I want to know is why the words won't work by themselves."

"We just don't know enough yet," said Mr. Wickens impatiently. He released the stone and it clicked on the desktop. "Every year we learn a little more. Maybe by your children's time we'll find the incantation that will make everything lift." He sniffed. "What do you want to make stones fly for, anyhow? You get into enough trouble just throwing them."

PORGIE'S brow furrowed. "There's a difference between *making* a thing do something, like when I lift it with my hand or mind, and putting a spell on it so it does the work by itself, like a broomstick."

There was a long silence in the study as each thought his own thoughts.

Finally Mr. Wickens said, "I don't want to bring up the unpleasant past, Porgie, but it would be well to remember what happened to your father. His doubts came later than yours—for a while he was my most promising student—but they were just as strong."

He opened a desk drawer, fumbled in it for a moment, and brought out a sheaf of papers yellow with age. "This is the paper that damned him—*An Enquiry into Non-Magical Methods of Levitation*. He wrote it to qualify for his Junior Adeptship." He threw the paper down in front of Porgie as if the touch of it defiled his fingers.

Porgie started to pick it up.

Mr. Wickens roared, "Don't touch it! It contains blasphemy!"

Porgie snatched back his hand. He looked at the top paper and saw a neat sketch of something that looked like a bird—except that it had two sets of wings, one in front and one in back.

Mr. Wickens put the papers back in the desk drawer. His dis-

approving eyes caught and held Porgie's as he said, "If you want to go the way of your father, none of *us* can stop you." His voice rose sternly. "But there is one who can . . . Remember the Black Man, Porgie, for his walk is terrible! There are fires in his eyes and no spell may defend you against him. When he came for your father, there was midnight at noon and a high screaming. When the sunlight came back, they were gone—and it is not good to think where."

Mr. Wickens shook his head as if overcome at the memory and pointed toward the door. "Think before you act. Porgie. Think well!"

Porgie was thinking as he left, but more about the sketch in his father's paper than about the Black Man.

THE orange crate with the two boards across it for wings had looked something like his father's drawing, but appearances had been deceiving. Porgie sat on the back steps of his house feeling sorry for himself and alternately rubbing two tender spots on his anatomy. Though they were at opposite ends, and had different immediate causes, they both grew out of the same thing. His bottom was sore as a result of a liberal application of his uncle's hand. His swollen nose came from

an aerial crack-up.

He'd hoisted his laboriously contrived machine to the top of the woodshed and taken a flying leap in it. The expected soaring glide hadn't materialized. Instead, there had been a sickening fall, a splintering crash, a momentary whirling of stars as his nose banged into something hard.

He wished now he hadn't invited Bull Pup to witness his triumph, because the story'd gotten right back to his uncle—with the usual results.

Just to be sure the lesson was pounded home, his uncle had taken away his broomstick for a week—and just so Porgie wouldn't sneak it out, he'd put a spell on it before locking it away in the closet.

"Didn't feel like flying, anyway," Porgie said sulkily to himself, but the pretense wasn't strong enough to cover up the loss. The gang was going over to Red Rocks to chase bats as soon as the sun went down, and he wanted to go along.

He shaded his eyes and looked toward the western Wall as he heard a distant halloo of laughing voices. They were coming in high and fast on their broomsticks. He went back to the woodshed so they wouldn't see him. He was glad he had when they swung low and began to circle the house yelling for him and Bull Pup. They

kept hooting and shouting until Homer flew out of his bedroom window to join them.

"Porgie can't come," he yelled. "He got licked and Dad took his broom away from him. Come on, gang!"

With a quick looping climb, he took the lead and they went hedge-hopping off toward Red Rocks. Bull Pup had been top dog ever since he got his big stick. He'd zoom up to five hundred feet, hang from his broom by his knees, and then let go. Down he'd plummet, his arms spread and body arched as if he were making a swan dive—and then, when the ground wasn't more than a hundred feet away, he'd call and his broomstick would arrow down after him and slide between his legs, lifting him up in a great sweeping arc that barely cleared the treetops.

"Showoff!" muttered Porgie and shut the woodshed door on the vanishing stick-riders.

Over on the work bench sat the little model of paper and sticks that had got him into trouble in the first place. He picked it up and gave it a quick shove into the air with his hands. It dove toward the floor and then, as it picked up speed, tilted its nose toward the ceiling and made a graceful loop in the air. Leveling off, it made a sudden veer to the left and crashed against the woodshed

wall. A wing splintered.

Porgie went to pick it up. "Maybe what works for little things doesn't work for big ones," he thought sourly. The orange crate and the crossed boards had been as close an approximation of the model as he had been able to make. Listlessly, he put the broken glider back on his work bench and went outside. Maybe Mr. Wickens and his uncle and all the rest were right. Maybe there was only one road to follow.

He did a little thinking about it and came to a conclusion that brought forth a secret grin. He'd do it their way—but there wasn't any reason why he couldn't hurry things up a bit. Waiting for his grandchildren to work things out wasn't getting *him* over the Wall.

Tomorrow, after school, he'd start working on his new idea, and this time maybe he'd find the way.

IN the kitchen, his uncle and aunt were arguing about him. Porgie paused in the hall that led to the front room and listened.

"Do you think I like to lick the kid? I'm not some kind of an ogre. It hurt me more than it hurt him."

"I notice you were able to sit down afterward," said Aunt Olga dryly.

"Well, what else could I do? Mr. Wickens didn't come right out

and say so, but he hinted that if Porgie didn't stop mooning around, he might be dropped from school altogether. He's having an unsettling effect on the other kids. Damn it, Olga, I've done everything for that boy I've done for my own son. What do you want me to do, stand back and let him end up like your brother?"

"You leave my brother out of this! No matter what Porgie does, you don't have to beat him. He's still only a little boy."

There was a loud snort. "In case you've forgotten, dear, he had his thirteenth birthday last March. He'll be a man pretty soon."

"Then why don't you have a man-to-man talk with him?"

"Haven't I tried? You know what happens every time. He gets off with those crazy questions and ideas of his and I lose my temper and pretty soon we're back where we started." He threw up his hands. "I don't know what to do with him. Maybe that fall he had this afternoon will do some good. I think he had a scare thrown into him that he won't forget for a long time. Where's Bull Pup?"

"Can't you call him Homer? It's bad enough having his friends calling him by that horrible name. He went out to Red Rocks with the other kids. They're having a bat hunt or something."

Porgie's uncle grunted and got up. "I don't see why that kid can't

stay at home at night for a change. I'm going in the front room and read the paper."

Porgie was already there, flipping the pages of his schoolbooks and looking studious. His uncle settled down in his easy chair, opened his paper, and lit his pipe. He reached out to put the charred match in the ashtray, and as usual the ashtray wasn't there.

"Damn that woman," he muttered to himself and raised his voice: "Porgie!"

"Yes, Uncle Veryl?"

"Bring me an ashtray from the kitchen, will you please? Your aunt has them all out there again."

"Sure thing," said Porgie and shut his eyes. He thought of the kitchen until a picture of it was crystal-clear in his mind. The beaten copper ashtray was sitting beside the sink where his aunt had left it after she had washed it out. He squinted the little eye inside his head, stared hard at the copper bowl, and whispered:

*"Ashtray fly,
Follow eye."*

Simultaneously he lifted with his mind. The ashtray quivered and rose slowly into the air.

KEEPING it firmly suspended, Porgie quickly visualized the kitchen door and the hallway and drifted it through.

"Porgie!" came his uncle's angry voice.

Porgie jumped, and there was a crash in the hallway outside as the bowl was suddenly released and crashed to the floor.

"How many times have I told you not to levitate around the house? If it's too much work to go out to the kitchen, tell me and I'll do it myself."

"I was just practicing," mumbled Porgie defensively.

"Well, practice outside. You've got the walls all scratched up from banging things against them. You know you shouldn't fool around with telekinesis outside sight range until you've mastered full visualization. Now go and get me that ashtray."

Crestfallen, Porgie went out the door into the hall. When he saw where the ashtray had fallen, he gave a silent whistle. Instead of coming down the center of the hall, it had been three feet off-course and heading directly for the hall table when he let it fall. In another second, it would have smashed into his aunt's precious black alabaster vase.

"Here it is, Uncle," he said, taking it into the front room. "I'm sorry."

His uncle looked at his unhappy face, sighed and reached out and tousled his head affectionately.

"Buck up, Porgie. I'm sorry I had to paddle you this afternoon. It was for your own good. Your aunt and I don't want you to get

into any serious trouble. You know what folks think about machines." He screwed up his face as if he'd said a dirty word. "Now, back to your books—we'll forget all about what happened today. Just remember this, Porgie: If there's anything you want to know, don't go fooling around on your own. Come and ask me, and we'll have a man-to-man talk."

Porgie brightened. "There's something I have been wondering about."

"Yes?" said his uncle encouragingly.

"How many eagles would it take to lift a fellow high enough so he could see what was on the other side of the Wall?"

Uncle Veryl counted to ten—very slowly.

THE next day Porgie went to work on his new project. As soon as school was out, he went over to the Public Library and climbed upstairs to the main circulation room.

"Little boys are not allowed in this section," the librarian said. "The children's division is downstairs."

"But I need a book," protested Porgie. "A book on how to fly."

"This section is only for adults."

Porgie did some fast thinking. "My uncle can take books from here, can't he?"

"I suppose so."

"And he could send me over to get something for him, couldn't he?"

The librarian nodded reluctantly.

Porgie prided himself on never lying. If the librarian chose to misconstrue his questions, it was her fault, not his.

"Well, then," he said, "do you have any books on how to make things fly in the air?"

"What kind of things?"

"Things like birds."

"Birds don't have to be made to fly. They're born that way."

"I don't mean real birds," said Porgie. "I mean birds you make."

"Oh, Animation. Just a second, let me visualize." She shut her eyes and a card catalogue across the room opened and shut one drawer after another. "Ah, that might be what he's looking for," she murmured after a moment, and concentrated again. A large brass-bound book came flying out of the stacks and came to rest on the desk in front of her. She pulled the index card out of the pocket in the back and shoved it toward Porgie. "Sign your uncle's name here."

He did and then, hugging the book to his chest, got out of the library as quickly as he could.

BY the time Porgie had worked three-quarters of the way through the book, he was about



ready to give up in despair. It was all grown-up magic. Each set of instructions he ran into either used words he didn't understand or called for unobtainable ingredients like powdered unicorn horns and the blood of red-headed female virgins.

He didn't know what a virgin was—all his uncle's encyclopedia had to say on the subject was that they were the only ones who could ride unicorns—but there was a red-head by the name of Dorothy Boggs who lived down the road a piece. He had a feeling, however, that neither she nor her family would take kindly to a request for two quarts of blood, so he kept on searching through the book. Almost at the very end he found a set of instructions he thought he could follow.

It took him two days to get the ingredients together. The only thing that gave him trouble was finding a toad—the rest of the stuff, though mostly nasty and odoriferous, was obtained with little difficulty. The date and exact time of the experiment was important and he surprised Mr. Wickens by taking a sudden interest in his Practical Astrology course.

At last, after laborious computations, he decided everything was ready.

Late that night, he slipped out of bed, opened his bedroom door a crack, and listened. Except for

the usual night noises and resonant snores from Uncle Veryl's room, the house was silent. He shut the door carefully and got his broomstick from the closet—Uncle Veryl had relented about that week's punishment.

Silently he drifted out through his open window and across the yard to the woodshed.

Once inside, he checked carefully to see that all the windows were covered. Then he lit a candle. He pulled a loose floorboard up and removed the book and his assembled ingredients. Quickly, he made the initial preparations.

First there was the matter of molding the clay he had taken from the graveyard into a rough semblance of a bird. Then, after sticking several white feathers obtained from last Sunday's chicken into each side of the figure to make wings, he annointed it with noxious mixture he had prepared in advance.

The moon was just setting behind the Wall when he began the incantation. Candlelight flickered on the pages of the old book as he slowly and carefully pronounced the difficult words.

WHEN it came time for the business with the toad, he almost didn't have the heart to go through with it; but he steeled himself and did what was necessary. Then, wincing, he jabbed his fore-

finger with a pin and slowly dripped the requisite three drops of blood down on the crude clay figure. He whispered:

*"Clay of graveyard,
White cock's feather,
Eye of toad,
Rise together!"*

Breathlessly he waited. He seemed to be in the middle of a circle of silence. The wind in the trees outside had stopped and there was only the sound of his own quick breathing. As the candlelight rippled, the clay figure seemed to quiver slightly as if it were hunching for flight.

Porgie bent closer, tense with anticipation. In his mind's eye, he saw himself building a giant bird with wings powerful enough to lift him over the Wall around the World. Swooping low over the schoolhouse during recess, he would wave his hands in a condescending gesture of farewell, and then as the kids hopped on their sticks and tried to follow him, he would rise higher and higher until he had passed the ceiling of their brooms and left them circling impotently below him. At last he would sweep over the Wall with hundreds of feet to spare, over it and then down—down into the great unknown.

The candle flame stopped flickering and stood steady and clear. Beside it, the clay bird squatted, lifeless and motionless.

Minutes ticked by and Porgie gradually saw it for what it was—a smelly clod of dirt with a few feathers stuck in it. There were tears in his eyes as he picked up the body of the dead toad and said softly, "I'm sorry."

When he came in from burying it, he grasped the image of the clay bird tightly in his mind and sent it swinging angrily around the shed. Feathers fluttered behind it as it flew faster and faster until in disgust he released it and let it smash into the rough boards of the wall. It crumbled into a pile of foul-smelling trash and fell to the floor. He stirred it with his toe, hurt, angry, confused.

His broken glider still stood where he had left it on the far end of his work bench. He went over and picked it up.

"At least you flew by yourself," he said, "and I didn't have to kill any poor little toads to make you."

Then he juggled it in his hand, feeling its weight, and began to wonder. It had occurred to him that maybe the wooden wings on his big orange-box glider had been too heavy.

"Maybe if I could get some long thin poles," he thought, "and some cloth to put across the wings . . ."

DURING the next three months, there was room in Porgie's mind for only one thing—the ma-

chine he was building in the roomy old cave at the top of the long hill on the other side of Arnett's grove. As a result, he kept slipping further and further behind at school.

Things at home weren't too pleasant, either—Bull Pup felt it was his duty to keep his parents fully informed of Porgie's shortcomings. Porgie didn't care though. He was too busy. Every minute he could steal was spent in either collecting materials or putting them together.

The afternoon the machine was finally finished, he could hardly tear himself away from it long enough to go home for dinner. He was barely able to choke down his food, and didn't even wait for dessert.

He sat on the grass in front of the cave, waiting for darkness. Below, little twinkling lights marked the villages that stretched across the plain for a full forty miles. Enclosing them like encircling arms stretched the dark and forbidding mass of the Wall. No matter where he looked, it stood high against the night. He followed its curve with his eyes until he had turned completely around, and then he shook his fist at it.

Patting the ungainly mass of the machine that rested on the grass beside him, he whispered fiercely, "I'll get over you yet. Old *Eagle* here will take me!"

Old *Eagle* was an awkward, boxkite-like affair; but to Porgie she was a thing of beauty. She had an uncovered fuselage composed of four long poles braced together to make a rectangular frame, at each end of which was fastened a large wing.

When it was dark enough, he climbed into the open frame and reached down and grabbed hold of the two lower members. Grunting, he lifted until the two upper ones rested under his armpits. There was padding there to support his weight comfortably once he was airborne. The bottom of the machine was level with his waist and the rest of him hung free. According to his thinking, he should be able to control his flight by swinging his legs. If he swung forward, the shifting weight should tilt the nose down; if he swung back, it should go up.

There was only one way to find out if his ifs were right. The *Eagle* was a heavy contraption. He walked awkwardly to the top of the hill, the cords standing out on his neck. He was scared as he looked down the long steep slope that stretched out before him—so scared that he was having trouble breathing. He swallowed twice in a vain attempt to moisten his dry throat, and then lunged forward, fighting desperately to keep his balance as his wabbling steps gradually picked up speed.

Faster he went, and faster, his steps turning into leaps as the wing surfaces gradually took hold. His toes scraped through the long grass and then they were dangling in free air.

He was aloft.

NOT daring to even move his head, he slanted his eyes down and to the left. The earth was slipping rapidly by a dozen feet below him. Slowly and cautiously, he swung his feet back. As the weight shifted, the nose of the glider rose. Up, up he went, until he felt a sudden slowing down and a clumsiness of motion. Almost instinctively, he leaned forward again, pointing the nose down in a swift dip to regain flying speed.

By the time he reached the bottom of the hill, he was a hundred and fifty feet up. Experimentally, he swung his feet a little to the left. The glider dipped slightly and turned. Soaring over a clump of trees, he felt a sudden lifting as an updraft caught him.

Up he went—ten, twenty, thirty feet—and then slowly began to settle again.

The landing wasn't easy. More by luck than by skill, he came down in the long grass of the meadow with no more damage than a few bruises. He sat for a moment and rested, his head spinning with excitement. He had

flown like a bird, without his stick, without uttering a word. There were other ways than magic!

His elation suddenly faded with the realization that, while gliding down was fun, the way over the Wall was *up*. Also, and of more immediate importance, he was half a mile from the cave with a contraption so heavy and unwieldy that he could never hope to haul it all the way back up the hill by himself. If he didn't get it out of sight by morning, there was going to be trouble, serious trouble. People took an unpleasant view of machines and those who built them.

Broomsticks, he decided, had certain advantages, after all. They might not fly very high, but at least you didn't have to walk home from a ride.

"If I just had a great big broomstick," he thought, "I could lift the *Eagle* up with it and fly her home."

He jumped to his feet. It might work!

He ran back up the hill as fast as he could and finally, very much out of breath, reached the entrance of the cave. Without waiting to get back his wind, he jumped on his stick and flew down to the stranded glider.

Five minutes later, he stepped back and said:

*"Broomstick fly,
Rise on high,*

*Over cloud
And into sky."*

It didn't fly. It couldn't. Porgie had lashed it to the framework of the *Eagle*. When he grabbed hold of the machine and lifted, nine-tenths of its weight was gone, canceled out by the broomstick's lifting power.

He towed it back up the hill and shoved it into the cave. Then he looked uneasily at the sky. It was later than he had thought. He should be home and in bed—but when he thought of the feeling of power he had had in his flight, he couldn't resist hauling the *Eagle* back out again.

AFTER checking the broomstick to be sure it was still fastened tightly to the frame, he went swooping down the hill again. This time when he hit the thermal over the clump of trees, he was pushed up a hundred feet before he lost it. He curved through the darkness until he found it again and then circled tightly within it.

Higher he went and higher, higher than any broomstick had ever gone!

When he started to head back, though, he didn't have such an easy time of it. Twice he was caught in downdrafts that almost grounded him before he was able to break loose from the tugging winds. Only the lifting power of his broomstick enabled him to stay

aloft. With it bearing most of the load, the *Eagle* was so light that it took just a flutter of air to sweep her up again.

He landed the glider a stone's throw from the mouth of his cave.

"Tomorrow night!" he thought exultantly as he unleashed his broomstick. "Tomorrow night!"

There was a tomorrow night, and many nights after that. The *Eagle* was sensitive to every updraft, and with care he found he could remain aloft for hours, riding from thermal to thermal. It was hard to keep his secret, hard to keep from shouting the news, but he had to. He slipped out at night to practice, slipping back in again before sunrise to get what sleep he could.

He circled the day of his fourteenth birthday in red and waited. He had a reason for waiting.

In the World within the Wall, fourteenth birthdays marked the boundary between the little and the big, between being a big child and a small man. Most important, they marked the time when one was taken to the Great Tower where the Adepts lived and given a full-sized broomstick powered by the most potent of spells, sticks that would climb to a full six hundred feet, twice the height that could be reached by the smaller ones the youngsters rode.

Porgie needed a man-sized stick, needed that extra power, for he

had found that only the strongest of updrafts would lift him past the three-hundred-foot ceiling where the lifting power of his little broomstick gave out. He had to get up almost as high as the Wall before he could make it across the wide expanse of flat plain that separated him from the box canyon where the great wind waited.

So he counted the slowly passing days and practiced flying during the rapidly passing nights.

THE afternoon of his fourteenth birthday found Porgie sitting on the front steps expectantly, dressed in his best and waiting for his uncle to come out of the house. Bull Pup came out and sat down beside him.

"The gang's having a coven up on top of old Baldy tonight," he said. "Too bad you can't come."

"I can go if I want to," said Porgie.

"How?" said Bull Pup and snickered. "You going to grow wings and fly? Old Baldy's five hundred feet up and your kid stick won't lift you that high."

"Today's my birthday."

"You think you're going to get a new stick?"

Porgie nodded.

"Well, you ain't. I heard Mom and Dad talking. Dad's mad because you flunked Alchemy. He said you had to be taught a lesson."

Porgie felt sick inside, but he wouldn't let Bull Pup have the satisfaction of knowing it.

"I don't care," he said. "I'll go to the coven if I want to. You just wait and see."

Bull Pup was laughing when he hopped on his stick and took off down the street. Porgie waited an hour, but his uncle didn't come out.

He went into the house. Nobody said anything about his new broomstick until after supper. Then his uncle called him into the living room and told him he wasn't getting it.

"But, Uncle Veryl, you promised!"

"It was a conditional promise, Porgie. There was a big if attached to it. Do you remember what it was?"

Porgie looked down at the floor and scuffed one toe on the worn carpet. "I tried."

"Did you really, son?" His uncle's eyes were stern but compassionate. "Were you trying when you fell asleep in school today? I've tried talking with you and I've tried whipping you and neither seems to work. Maybe this will. Now you run upstairs and get started on your studies. When you can show me that your marks are improving, we'll talk about getting you a new broomstick. Until then, the old one will have to do."

Porgie knew that he was too big

to cry, but when he got to his room he couldn't help it. He was stretched out on his bed with his face buried in the pillows when he heard a hiss from the window. He looked up to see Bull Pup sitting on his stick, grinning malevolently at him.

"What do you want?" sniffed Porgie.

"Only little kids cry," said Bull Pup.

"I wasn't crying. I got a cold."

"I just saw Mr. Wickens. He was coming out of that old cave back of Arnett's grove. He's going to get the Black Man, I'll bet."

"I don't know anything about that old cave," said Porgie, sitting bolt upright on his bed.

"Oh, yes, you do. I followed you up there one day. You got a machine in there. I told Mr. Wickens and he gave me a quarter. He was real interested."

Porgie jumped from his bed and ran toward the window, his face red and his fists doubled. "I'll fix you!"

Bull Pup backed his broomstick just out of Porgie's reach, and then stuck his thumbs in his ears and waggled his fingers. When Porgie started to throw things, he gave a final taunt and swooped away toward old Baldy and the coven.

PORGIE'S uncle was just about to go out in the kitchen and fix himself a sandwich when the

doorbell rang. Grumbling, he went out into the front hall. Mr. Wickens was at the door. He came into the house and stood blinking in the light. He seemed uncertain as to just how to begin.

"I've got bad news for you," he said finally. "It's about Porgie. Is your wife still up?"

Porgie's uncle nodded anxiously.

"She'd better hear this, too."

Aunt Olga put down her knitting when they came into the living room.

"You're out late, Mr. Wickens."

"It's not of my own choosing."

"Porgie's done something again," said his uncle.

Aunt Olga sighed. "What is it this time?"

Mr. Wickens hesitated, cleared his throat, and finally spoke in a low hushed voice: "Porgie's built a machine. The Black Man told me. He's coming after the boy tonight."

Uncle Veryl dashed up the stairs to find Porgie. He wasn't in his room.

Aunt Olga just sat in her chair and cried shrilly.

THE moon stood high and silver-lit the whole countryside. Porgie could make out the world far below him almost as if it were day. Miles to his left, he saw the little flickering fires on top of old Baldy where the kids were holding their

coven. He fought an impulse and then succumbed to it. He circled the *Eagle* over a clump of trees until the strong rising currents lifted him almost to the height of the Wall. Then he twisted his body and banked over toward the distant red glowing fires.

Minutes later, he went silently over them at eight hundred feet, feeling out the air currents around the rocks. There was a sharp downdraft on the far side of Baldy that dropped him suddenly when he glided into it, but he made a quick turn and found untroubled air before he fell too far. On the other side, toward the box canyon, he found what he wanted, a strong rising current that seemed to have no upward limits.

He fixed its location carefully in his mind and then began to circle down toward the coven. Soon he was close enough to make out individual forms sitting silently around their little fires.

"Hey, Bull Pup," he yelled at the top of his lungs.

A stocky figure jumped to its feet and looked wildly around for the source of the ghostly voice.

"Up here!"

Porgie reached in his pocket, pulled out a small pebble and chucked it down. It cracked against a shelf of rock four feet from Bull Pup. Porgie's cousin let out a howl of fear. The rest of the kids jumped up and reared back their

heads at the night sky, their eyes blinded by firelight.

"I told you I could come to the coven if I wanted to," yelled Porgie, "but now I don't. I don't have any time for kid stuff; I'm going over the Wall!"

During his last pass over the plateau he wasn't more than thirty feet up. As he leaned over, his face was clearly visible in the firelight.

Placing one thumb to his nose he wagged his fingers and chanted, "Nyah, nyah, nyah, you can't catch me!"

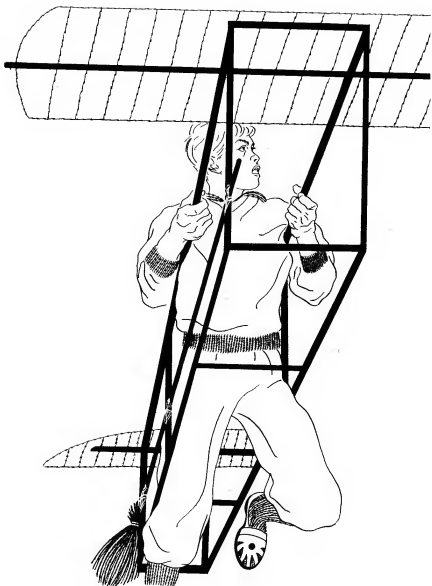
His feet were almost scraping the ground as he glided out over the drop-off. There was an anxious second of waiting and then he felt the sure steady thrust of the up-current against his wings.

He looked back. The gang was milling around, trying to figure out what had happened. There was an angry shout of command from Bull Pup, and after a moment of confused hesitation they all made for their brooms and swooped up into the air.

Porgie mentally gauged his altitude and then relaxed. He was almost at their ceiling and would be above it before they reached him.

He flattened out his glide and yelled, "Come on up! Only little kids play that low!"

Bull Pup's stick wouldn't rise any higher. He circled impotently, shaking his fist at the machine



that rode serenely above him.

"You just wait," he yelled. "You can't stay up there all night. You got to come down some time, and when you do we'll be waiting for you."

"Nyah, nyah, nyah," chanted Porgie and mounted higher into the moonlit night.

WHEN the updraft gave out, he wasn't as high as he wanted to be, but there wasn't anything he could do about it. He turned and started a flat glide across the level plain toward the box canyon. He wished now that he had left Bull Pup and the other kids alone. They were following along below him. If he dropped down to their level before the canyon winds caught him, he was in trouble.

He tried to flatten his glide still more, but instead of saving altitude he went into a stall that dropped him a hundred feet before he was able to regain control. He saw now that he could never make it without dropping to Bull Pup's level.

Bull Pup saw it, too, and let out an exultant yell: "Just you wait! You're going to get it good!"

Porgie peered over the side into the darkness where his cousin rode, his pug face gleaming palely in the moonlight.

"Leave him alone, gang," Bull Pup shouted. "He's mine!"

The rest pulled back and circled

slowly as the *Eagle* glided quietly down among them. Bull Pup darted in and rode right alongside Porgie.

He pointed savagely toward the ground: "Go down or I'll knock you down!"

Porgie kicked at him, almost upsetting his machine. He wasn't fast enough. Bull Pup dodged easily. He made a wide circle and came back, reaching out and grabbing the far end of the *Eagle's* front wing. Slowly and maliciously, he began to jerk it up and down, twisting violently as he did so.

"Get down," he yelled, "or I'll break it off!"

Porgie almost lost his head as the wrenching threatened to throw him out of control.

"Let go!" he screamed, his voice cracking.

Bull Pup's face had a strange excited look on it as he gave the wing another jerk. The rest of the boys were becoming frightened as they saw what was happening.

"Quit it, Bull Pup!" somebody called. "Do you want to kill him?"

"Shut up or you'll get a dose of the same!"

Porgie fought to clear his head. His broomstick was tied to the frame of the *Eagle* so securely that he would never be able to free it in time to save himself. He stared into the darkness until he caught

the picture of Bull Pup's broomstick sharply in his mind. He'd never tried to handle anything that big before, but it was that or nothing.

Tensing suddenly, he clamped his mind down on the picture and held it hard. He knew that words didn't help, but he uttered them anyway:

*"Broomstick stop,
Flip and flop!"*

There was a sharp tearing pain in his head. He gritted his teeth and held on, fighting desperately against the red haze that threatened to swallow him. Suddenly there was a half-startled, half-frightened squawk from his left wingtip, and Bull Pup's stick jerked to an abrupt halt, gyrating so madly that its rider could hardly hang on.

"All right, the rest of you," screamed Porgie. "Get going or I'll do the same thing to you!"

They got, arcing away in terrified disorder. Porgie watched as they formed a frightened semicircle around the blubbering Bull Pup. With a sigh of relief, he let go with his mind.

As he left them behind in the night, he turned his head back and yelled weakly, "Nyah, nyah, nyah, you can't catch me!"

HE was only fifty feet off the ground when he glided into the far end of the box canyon and was suddenly caught by the strong

updraft. As he soared in a tight spiral, he slumped down against the arm-rests, his whole body shaking in delayed reaction.

The lashings that held the front wing to the frame were dangerously loose from the manhandling they had received. One more tug and the whole wing might have twisted back, dumping him down on the sharp rocks below. Shudders ran through the *Eagle* as the supports shook in their loose bonds. He clamped both hands around the place where the rear wing spar crossed the frame and tried to steady it.

He felt his stick's lifting power give out at three hundred feet. The *Eagle* felt clumsy and heavy, but the current was still enough to carry him slowly upward. Foot by foot he rose toward the top of the Wall, losing a precious hundred feet once when he spiraled out of the updraft and had to circle to find it. A wisp of cloud curled down from the top of the Wall and he felt a moment of panic as he climbed into it.

Momentarily, there was no left or right or up or down. Only damp whiteness. He had the feeling that the *Eagle* was falling out of control; but he kept steady, relying on the feel for the air he had gotten during his many practice flights.

The lashings had loosened more. The full strength of his hands wasn't enough to keep the wing

from shuddering and trembling. He struggled resolutely to maintain control of ship and self against the strong temptation to lean forward and throw the *Eagle* into a shallow dive that would take him back to normalcy and safety.

He was almost at the end of his resolution when with dramatic suddenness he glided out of the cloud into the clear moon-touched night. The up-current under him seemed to have lessened. He banked in a gentle arc, trying to find the center of it again.

As he turned, he became aware of something strange, something different, something almost frightening. For the first time in his life, there was no Wall to block his vision, no vast black line stretching through the night.

He was above it!

There was no time for looking. With a loud *ping*, one of the lashings parted and the leading edge of the front wing flapped violently. The glider began to pitch and yaw, threatening to nose over into a plummeting dive. He fought for mastery, swinging his legs like desperate pendulums as he tried to correct the erratic side swings that threatened to throw him out of control. As he fought, he headed for the Wall.

If he were to fall, it would be on the other side. At least he would cheat old Mr. Wickens and the Black Man.

NOW he was directly over the Wall. It stretched like a wide road underneath him, its smooth top black and shining in the moonlight. Acting on quick impulse, he threw his body savagely forward and to the right. The ungainly machine dipped abruptly and dove toward the black surface beneath it.

Eighty feet, seventy, sixty, fifty—he had no room to maneuver, there would be no second chance—thirty, twenty—

He threw his weight back, jerking the nose of the *Eagle* suddenly up. For a precious second the wings held, there was a sharp breaking of his fall; then, with a loud cracking noise, the front wing buckled back in his face. There was a moment of blind whirling fall and a splintering crash that threw him into darkness.

Slowly, groggily, Porgie pulled himself up out of the broken wreckage. The *Eagle* had made her last flight. She perched precariously, so near the outside edge of the wall that part of her rear wing stretched out over nothingness.

Porgie crawled cautiously across the slippery wet surface of the top of the Wall until he reached the center. There he crouched down to wait for morning. He was exhausted, his body so drained of energy that in spite of himself he kept slipping into an uneasy sleep.

Each time he did, he'd struggle

back to consciousness trying to escape the nightmare figures that scampered through his brain. He was falling, pursued by wheeling batlike figures with pug faces. He was in a tiny room and the walls were inching in toward him and he could hear the voice of Bull Pup in the distance chanting, "You're going to get it." And then the room turned into a long dark corridor and he was running. Mr. Wickens was close behind him and he had long sharp teeth and he kept yelling, "Porgie! Porgie!"

He shuddered back to wakefulness, crawled to the far edge of the Wall and, hanging his head over, tried to look down at the Outside World. The clouds had boiled up and there was nothing underneath him but gray blankness hiding the sheer thousand-foot drop. He crawled back to his old spot and looked toward the east, praying for the first sign of dawn. There was only blackness there.

He started to doze off again and once more he heard the voice: "Porgie! Porgie!"

He opened his eyes and sat up. The voice was still calling, even though he was awake. It seemed to be coming from high up and far away.

It came closer, closer, and suddenly he saw it in the darkness—a black figure wheeling above the Wall like a giant crow. Down it

came, nearer and nearer, a man in black with arms outstretched and long fingers hooked like talons!

PORGIE scrambled to his feet and ran, his feet skidding on the slippery surface. He looked back over his shoulder. The black figure was almost on top of him. Porgie dodged desperately and slipped.

He felt himself shoot across the slippery surface toward the edge of the Wall. He clawed, scrabbling for purchase. He couldn't stop. One moment he felt wet coldness slipping away under him; the next, nothingness as he shot out into the dark and empty air.

He spun slowly as he fell. First the clouds were under him and then they tipped and the star-flecked sky took their places. He felt cradled, suspended in time. There was no terror. There was nothing.

Nothing—until suddenly the sky above him was blotted out by a plummeting black figure that swooped down on him, hawklike and horrible.

Porgie kicked wildly. One foot slammed into something solid and for an instant he was free. Then strong arms circled him from behind and he was jerked out of the nothingness into a world of falling and fear.

There was a sudden strain on his chest and then he felt himself

being lifted. He was set down gently on the top of the Wall.

He stood defiant, head erect, and faced the black figure.

"I won't go back. You can't make me go back."

"You don't have to go back, Porgie."

He couldn't see the hooded face, but the voice sounded strangely familiar.

"You've earned your right to see what's on the other side," it said. Then the figure laughed and threw back the hood that partially covered its face.

In the bright moonlight, Porgie saw Mr. Wickens!

THE schoolmaster nodded cheerfully. "Yes, Porgie, I'm the Black Man. Bit of a shock, isn't it?"

Porgie sat down suddenly.

"I'm from the Outside," said Mr. Wickens, seating himself carefully on the slick black surface. "I guess you could call me a sort of observer."

Porgie's spinning mind couldn't catch up with the new ideas that were being thrown at him. "Observer?" he said uncomprehendingly. "Outside?"

"Outside. That's where you'll be spending your next few years. I don't think you'll find life better there and I don't think you'll find it worse. It'll be different, though, I can guarantee that." He chuck-

led. "Do you remember what I said to you in my office that day—that Man can't follow two paths at once, that Mind and Nature are bound to conflict? That's true, but it's also false. You can have both, but it takes two worlds to do it.

"Outside, where you're going, is the world of the machines. It's a good world, too. But the men who live there saw a long time ago that they were paying a price for it; that control over Nature meant that the forces of the Mind were neglected, for the machine is a thing of logic and reason, but miracles aren't. Not yet. So they built the Wall and they placed people within it and gave them such books and such laws as would insure development of the powers of the Mind. At least they hoped it would work that way—and it did."

"But—but why the Wall?" asked Porgie.

"Because their guess was right. There is magic." He pulled a bunch of keys from his pocket. "Lift it, Porgie."

Porgie stared at it until he had the picture in his mind and then let his mind take hold, pulling with invisible hands until the keys hung high in the air. Then he dropped them back into Mr. Wickens' hand.

"What was that for?"

"Outsiders can't do that," said the schoolmaster. "And they can't

do conscious telepathy—what you call mind-talk—either. They can't because they really don't believe such things can be done. The people inside the Wall do, for they live in an atmosphere of magic. But once these things are worked out, and become simply a matter of training and method, then the ritual, the mumbo-jumbo, the deeply ingrained belief in the existence of supernatural forces will be no longer necessary.

"These phenomena will be only tools that anybody can be trained to use, and the crutches can be thrown away. Then the Wall will come tumbling down. But until then—" he stopped and frowned in mock severity—"there will always be a Black Man around to see that the people inside don't split themselves up the middle trying to walk down two roads at once."

There was a lingering doubt in Porgie's eyes. "But you flew without a machine."

THE Black Man opened his cloak and displayed a small gleaming disk that was strapped to his chest. He tapped it. "A machine, Porgie. A machine, just like your glider, only of a different sort and much better. It's almost as good as levitation. Mind and Nature . . . magic and science . . . they'll get together eventually."

He wrapped his cloak about

him again. "It's cold up here. Shall we go? Tomorrow is time enough to find out what is Outside the Wall that goes around the World."

"Can't we wait until the clouds lift?" asked Porgie wistfully. "I'd sort of like to see it for the first time from up here."

"We could," said Mr. Wickens, "but there is somebody you haven't seen for a long time waiting for you down there. If we stay up here, he'll be worried."

Porgie looked up blankly. "I don't know anybody Outside. I—" He stopped suddenly. He felt as if he were about to explode. "Not my father!"

"Who else? He came out the easy way. Come, now, let's go and show him what kind of man his son has grown up to be. Are you ready?"

"I'm ready," said Porgie.

"Then help me drag your contraption over to the other side of the Wall so we can drop it Inside. When the folk find the wreckage in the morning, they'll know what the Black Man does to those who build machines instead of tending to their proper business. It should have a salutary effect on Bull Pup and the others."

He walked over to the wreckage of the *Eagle* and began to tug at it.

"Wait," said Porgie. "Let me." He stared at the broken glider un-

til his eyes began to burn. Then he gripped and pulled.

Slowly, with an increasing consciousness of mastery, he lifted until the glider floated free and was rocking gently in the slight breeze that rippled across the top of the great Wall. Then, with a sudden shove, he swung it far out over the abyss and released it.

The two stood silently, side by side, watching the *Eagle* pitch downward on broken wings. When it was lost in the darkness below, Mr. Wickens took Porgie in his strong arms and stepped confidently to the edge of the Wall.

"Wait a second," said Porgie, remembering a day in the school-

master's study and a switch that had come floating obediently down through the air. "If you're from Outside, how come you can do lifting?"

Mr. Wickens grinned. "Oh, I was born Inside. I went over the Wall for the first time when I was just a little older than you are now."

"In a glider?" asked Porgie.

"No," said the Black Man, his face perfectly sober. "I went out and caught myself a half-dozen eagles."

Theodore R. Cogswell

For centuries, Kareans have used the lunar or farmer's calendar, and their crops seldom have frozen or failed because of weather conditions.

The calendar is counted in cycles of 60 years, with an extra month added to a year every few years. The second year I was there was 13 months long, with two months of March. The month doubled before that was May. The only month never doubled is November.

The 60-year cycle is divided into five smaller cycles of 12 years each, and each of these years of the smaller cycle is named for an animal. The animals include the rat, cow, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, chicken, dog and a hog. During the 60 years these names are repeated five times.

A person born in a rat year is called a rat, in pig years a pig or hog, and so on. The old people hold very firmly to the belief that a person born in any animal year takes on the characteristic nature of that animal. According to old Korean custom, a man should never marry a woman whose birth-year animal is larger and stranger than his. Thus women born in a horse year can only marry dragon-year men, and many of them are never able to marry at all.

—From *I Married a Korean* by Agnes Davis Kim (John Day)



WIRE-HAIRED RADICAL

By JOSEPH SHALLIT

Think you're living a dog's life?

Man, you never had it that good...

IT came as a stinging surprise to all the dogs in the neighborhood. Terry had always been well-liked. Even dogs who ordinarily didn't care for wire-haired terriers liked Terry. He was friendly, easy-going. He shared food—sometimes even steak—and

he'd never been known to say a good word about people. Never. That was what got everybody. He hadn't ever said anything out of line until now.

Terry was lying in the high grass of the vacant lot when he said the thing. With him at the

Illustrated by CAVAT

time were a springer spaniel named Spud, a shaggy, smallish Gordon setter named Woodsy, and a big collie named Jumper.

The spaniel growled uncomfortably when Terry stopped talking. "Cut it out, Terry," he said. "I don't like to hear that kind of talk even as a joke!"

"I'm not joking," Terry said quietly. "That's what I'm going to do."

"You mean it? You really mean it?" sputtered the setter.

"Of course he doesn't mean it," said the spaniel.

"Let's change the subject," said the big collie, rolling over and rubbing his back in the rough grass. "It's not decent."

TERRY scratched thoughtfully behind his right ear. "Don't think I've decided this on the spur of the moment. I've thought about it a good long while. Every time I look at Miss Harrington, I feel . . . well, I feel I just owe it to her to tell her—"

"I'll bite your head off if you talk like that again!" yelled the spaniel. "She's a Bloop! Get that into your skull. A Bloop!"

"So what? Can't I feel I owe something to a Bloop?" Terry said.

"No, damn you—no!"

"Do you realize," said the collie, standing up, "that it's an insult to all of us for you to talk like that?"

"It is not," Terry complained. "All I said was—"

"You said you owed something to a Bloop!" blurted the shaggy little setter.

"All right, I did," Terry said darkly. "Some Bloops I know are a lot finer than—"

"But they're still Bloops!" yelled the spaniel. "They're still our dupes, our suckers. Do you realize that one little word out of your damn silly mouth could wreck everything we've built up for four thousand years? Everything! Everything that's happened, all the way back to Amenhabi!"

At the sound of the revered name, all the dogs, including Terry, stiffened and wagged their tails piously, once to the right, once to the left.

"I don't see why you have to bring religion into it," said Terry, after an uneasy silence.

"Well, that happens to be exactly what it is—religion," snapped the big collie. "Amenhabi—" again every tail wagged reverently—"left us a code we've all sworn to live by—you just the same as the rest of us, Terry. We've sworn never to talk where any Bloop might overhear us. We've sworn never to do anything, directly or indirectly, that would let the Bloops know we're smarter than they are. We've all taken that oath, Terry. Remember?"

"I remember," Terry said, a

little sullenly. "I'm just not very religious—"

"Look," broke in the spaniel, lowering himself on his front legs. "It doesn't matter especially whether you call it religion or not. I'm not even sure that Amenhabí—" the tails wagged, once right, once left—"thought of it as religion. He probably considered it just a practical matter. He just happened to discover accidentally that if he trailed after a Bloop and licked his hand and acted dumb and worshipful, the Bloop would take him into his house, give him a place to sleep and feed him."

HE shrugged. "Amenhabí realized right away that the whole setup would be ruined if he did anything to show he was smarter than the Bloop. That's why he made his offspring swear never to talk in front of a Bloop, and that's why we've been taking the same oath ever since. I think it must have been many years later that some of us started making a religion out of it. I prefer to think of it as just common sense—self-preservation."

"You bet," said the setter, a gleam in his eyes. "Don't think I haven't wanted to sound off to my Bloop lots of times. When he makes me chase that rubber ball till my tongue is hanging down to my pasterns . . . but I don't let

out a yap. I run and get the damn ball and bring it back, and bark like I'm crazy happy. You know why? Because I know if I said anything, I'd be out on my tail in a minute, scrabbling for my food in garbage cans instead of getting it served up to me."

"I think it's a tribute to all Edorians, the way we've played dumb all these thousands of years," said the collie sonorously. "The Bloops have completely lost record of the fact that we Edorians used to talk before Amenhabí's time."

"Yeah," said the spaniel. "Except for those jokes the Bloops sometimes tell about 'talking dogs.' There must be some kind of vague tradition . . ."

"It gives me the willies every time I hear one of those jokes," said the setter.

"I've never gotten used to that word 'dog,'" said the collie irritably. "We're Edorians. Why do they all say 'dog'? It sounds so flippant—insulting."

"Maybe it's the same thing as our calling them Bloops," Terry said mildly. "Maybe that would sound insulting to them."

"You're always seeing the Bloops' side of it," growled the spaniel.

Terry shook his head. "Not always. If you think I'm a Bloop-lover, you're mistaken. I'm making an exception only for Miss Har-

rington. I just can't go on fooling her . . . I want her to know I can talk and understand her. That's all. I'll get her to promise not to tell any other Bloop—"

"Listen to that!" hooted the setter. "Did you ever know a Bloop to keep a secret about us? Any little thing we do, they're all yapping to each other about it in a minute."

"I know, I know," Terry said. "But Miss Harrington is different."

"Hah!" said the collie nastily. "You haven't gone native, by any chance?"

Terry sprang up on all fours, teeth bared. "What do you mean by that!"

The collie narrowed his eyes suggestively. "You and the Bloop aren't perhaps—?"

TERRY gave a furious yelp and leaped. The collie sprang back, but not fast enough. Terry landed against his side, teeth jabbing into the collie's neck just below the crest. The collie was very shaggy. Terry bit hard to get through to the skin, and his mouth was stuffed with hair. The collie whirled his shoulders powerfully. Terry's tight little body swung around like a pennant. He bit hard on the collie's hair, but he couldn't hold his grip. It gave way. He went flying through the grass.

"Stay away from me, you runt, or I'll kill you!" the collie snarled.

"Stop it, fellows, stop it!" the setter cried, running around aimlessly.

"Let them fight it out," said the spaniel. "That terrier can use a good pasting."

Terry came charging back through the grass. The collie, who weighed almost three times as much as Terry, waited tensely, his legs splayed, his long muzzle pushed forward, his teeth flashing. Terry feinted at his throat, dodged as the collie's jaws darted at him, swung around to the collie's side and dove at the left hind leg, clamping his teeth just above the hock.

The collie's whole body stiffened. His howl of pain seemed to run from his tail to his throat. "Let go—I'll kill you!" he gasped. He writhed and twisted in a tortured circle, desperately nosing for a bite at his little tormentor. But Terry nimbly stayed out of biting-range, grinding on the sensitive tendons at the back of the leg.

"All right," the collie whimpered finally. "I take it back."

Terry slowly unclamped his teeth. "Okay—I'll call it quits," he panted. "But I don't want to hear any remarks like that again! I don't have to take that from anybody!" He glared at the other three dogs. "Just for your information, Miss Harrington has a he-Bloop calling on her and they're going to get married soon,

so you can see there's nothing personal between me and Miss Harrington."

"Let's skip it," said the spaniel, tiredly. "What I want to get straight with Terry is that he mustn't say anything to that Bloop—"

"Shhh!" The setter jerked up-right nervously. "Here come some Bloops."

Two young women, one in a green dress and one in a brown dress, came toward them across the grassy lot.

"**D**AMN them," whispered the spaniel. "Always breaking up a conversation." He wrinkled his lips wryly and began to bark—"Whoof! Whoof! Whoof!"

"Arf! Arf! Arf!" barked the setter, pretending he had fleas behind his right ear and slapping at it with his paw.

"Browr! Browr!" barked Terry, acting as if he were aroused by the cat looking out the window of a house across the street.

"Owee!" barked the collie sullenly, lying down and putting his head between his paws.

The two women walked close. "Sounds like a symphony," said Green Dress, and Brown Dress's laugh tinkled over them.

Brown Dress stopped near the spaniel. "Why, this is the Stantons' dog," she said. She bent down. "Isn't it cute?" she said,

scratching him daintily on the skull. The spaniel 'mechanically' pushed his muzzle up into her hand and licked her palm. "Isn't it cute?" cooed Brown Dress.

"Better be careful," said Green Dress. "The mutt doesn't look very clean."

"Of course it's clean. Aren't you?" Brown Dress said to the spaniel, her fingers scratching along his back. The spaniel squirmed around until he got her hand directly behind his withers, and then he pushed up against her fingers and rubbed luxuriously.

The other dogs stopped what they were doing and watched him. Brown Dress glanced around.

"Look at their faces!" she exclaimed. "Don't they look exactly like people?"

"Arf! Arf!" barked the setter nervously, looking away and pawing in the dirt.

"Growr!" said Terry uneasily, eying the cat across the street.

The spaniel humped up his back to get a final scratch from the woman's fingers, then abruptly became interested in a flying milkweed and took off across the grass.

"Let's go," said Green Dress, "before we get fleas." The two women walked away toward the pavement.

Panting, the spaniel came back and sat down. "I've been hoping for hours to get some Bloop to

scratch that place I can't reach. Sure felt good." He suddenly glowered at Terry. "You see the point? If that Bloop knew I have more brains than she does, do you think she'd stop to scratch my back?"

"You don't have to keep harping on the same thing," Terry said testily. "I admit you're right. But, darn it, Miss Harrington is a special case. I just don't have the heart to keep fooling her—"

"Why? For gosh sakes, why?"

"Because she's been very kind to me," Terry said.

"Oh, you soft-headed—"

"Two months ago, when I was sick, she took such care of me—got up at night to fill my water dish—got the best doctor she could get. She took better care of me than if I were a Bloop."

"So what?" yelped the spaniel. "Doesn't she get paid back? Don't you lick her hand? Don't you look worshipfully at her? Don't you come running the instant she pipes up? Don't you bark when she comes home and jump all around her as if she were the only Bloop in the world?"

"Yes, but—"

"So why shouldn't she take care of you better than she would a Bloop? What Bloop would give her all that devotion?"

"Miss Harrington would take care of me even if I didn't put on an act," Terry said firmly. "That's absolutely all I want to

say on the subject. My mind's made up. Now, if you fellows will excuse me—"

He set off across the lot toward the pavement, looking determined.

The other three dogs stared after him in horror.

"He's going to do it!" the setter cried.

"We've got to stop him," the spaniel gritted. "Let's go!"

The three dogs rushed through the grass, the collie limping slightly because of the aching tendon in his left hind leg. They caught up with Terry just as he was turning the corner toward the two-story, buff brick, tile-roofed house where he lived with Miss Harrington. They swerved around in front of him and stopped, facing him, not saying anything.

"Leave me alone, fellows," Terry said tightly, but not very loudly because he was too close to the houses.

"Come on back to the lot—we want to talk to you," the spaniel said.

"I don't want to talk any more," Terry growled. "Get out of my way, please."

"Take him, fellows," the spaniel said softly.

THE three dogs leaped at Terry simultaneously. Their combined weight of 120 pounds hit Terry's 18 pounds, knocking him

flat on his belly. He squirmed furiously under them. The three dogs craftily eased off him, let him get to his feet, then pressed around him. They nipped him, shouldered him, pawed him, forced him back around the corner, back toward the vacant lot. Terry snapped wildly at them, getting a bit of hair, a bit of skin. He ducked his head suddenly and made a diving rush through them. The spaniel's jaws snapped on Terry's right hind leg and held on. The other two dogs bit into the hair on both flanks. Terry was a writhing fluff of fur between them as they struggled across the pavement and into the grass.

"The packing box!" the spaniel panted.

It was a wooden box, about four feet high, that had been lying at one end of the lot for more than a year. One side of it was slightly pried loose, and the dogs often hid inside when they wanted to escape the ball-chasing games people were always trying to inveigle them into.

The three dogs wrestled Terry across the field and, after a wild tangle near the box, jammed him in through the narrow opening. Terry rolled sideways on the rough floor and lay there, gasping. Outside the opening, the other three dogs leaned against each other, puffing and shaking.

"We've—we've saved all Edo-

rians—from a—terrible fate," panted the collie.

"We—sure—have," panted the setter.

A minute later, the setter said doubtfully: "What are we going to do with him?"

The spaniel shrugged. "Keep him here till he comes to his senses."

The setter looked across the field at the long shadows of the late afternoon sun. "Okay—but I'll have to leave you soon. It's getting close to my dinner time."

"We're all in this together," the spaniel said grimly. "We're staying here—all of us."

"But how long can we keep it up?" the setter whined. "We've got to eat sometime. Besides, my Bloops will come looking for me, and I couldn't refuse to go with them—it would upset them."

"Same here," the collie said. "Soon as they miss me a couple of hours, my Bloops get lonesome and come after me."

The spaniel looked at them bitterly. "All right, you damn Bloop-lovers. We'll have to get hold of some Edorians with a little guts. Setter, you take a run down to the waterfront and pick up three or four mongrels. Tell them—"

"Not me!" The setter shook his tousled black head vigorously. "Go down to that tough neighborhood by myself? You think I'm crazy?"

"Just tell them about the emerg-

ency. They'll want to help."

"Yeah, sure. They'd have my ears and two front legs chewed off before I could open my mouth."

TERRY'S muzzle poked weakly through the opening in the box. "Say, fellows, let's quit this kidding—I really have to go. Miss Harrington—"

"Get back!" the spaniel snarled, baring his teeth. Terry retreated.

The spaniel turned to the collie. "Okay," he said. "Friend setter here is scared of his own tail—you'll have to go to the waterfront."

"All the way down there?" the collie buffed. "Why don't you go yourself, since it's your idea? I never travel down that way."

"And leave you here to guard the terrier?" the spaniel said skeptically. "After he just handed you a royal lacing?"

"What lacing! He just got hold of me where I couldn't reach him, the little stinker. But he can't get out of this box with me standing here, you can count on that."

The spaniel looked uncertainly at him. "Okay," he said finally. "Guard him with your life." He loped away through the grass, onto the pavement, and out of sight around the corner.

Terry pushed his nose through the opening again. "Listen, fellows, if you'll just turn your backs for a minute, I'll make it worth your

while. I'll bring around some steak—Miss Harrington always buys the best steaks—"

"Get back!" The setter jabbed at him, nipping the tip of Terry's nose.

Terry withdrew again. Penned in as he was, he couldn't maneuver, couldn't use his only effective tactic against superior weight—speed. He nosed around the sides of the box, but the boards were all nailed securely. He lay down miserably on his belly. If he could only have gotten word to Miss Harrington and spared her worry, the situation wouldn't have bothered him so much. He knew that right at that moment she must be looking anxiously out the window, and soon she would be walking around outside, nervously hunting for him. If the other Edorians could only understand how good-hearted she was . . .

GRADUALLY the inside of the box darkened. Evening was creeping in ominously. In a little while, the spaniel would be back with the waterfront toughs—

Terry stood up and desperately looked around. The big dark bulk of the collie and the setter still blocked his escape. But their voices sounded somehow different than before. Terry nosed quickly to the opening.

"You stay here," the collie was saying softly. "I'll only be a min-

ute—I'll be right back."

"I saw her first," the setter said. "You stay here."

"Ah, you little runt, she wouldn't pay any attention to you! I'm going—be right back."

"No, you don't!" the setter yawned. "I saw her first."

Terry pushed his head out through the opening. The collie and the setter were racing across the field toward a female cocker spaniel who was dawdling along the sidewalk.

In an instant Terry was out of the box. He streaked across the field in the opposite direction. He ran into the alley behind the houses, dodged three low-hanging clothes-lines, climbed under the iron fence behind Miss Harrington's place, ran across the lawn, down through the open cellar window, and up the stairs into the living room.

He stopped, panting.

Miss Harrington was there. But she looked very strange. She was sitting on the chair, eyes half closed, not saying anything. Her pale brown hair was slightly mussed. On the coffee table near her knees was a small tan bottle with a gaudy label, and a glass. The bottle was almost empty.

"You!" Miss Harrington finally said. Her head weaved slightly.

Terry's heart thumped in panic. She was sick. She was very sick.

"You . . . stay out all hours—"

Miss Harrington's soft voice was blurred—"come in any old time you please . . . you think I'll be glad to see you!" She picked up the glass, closed her eyes and took a long drink. She put the glass down, and her whole face wrinkled up. Terry looked at her frantically. She had never behaved like this before. That bottle had stood untouched in the closet ever since he could remember.

Her long eyelashes moved apart. "Just like all the other males," she said shakily. "You and Roger. Think you can go off somewhere and not say a word . . . not even phone . . . come back any time you darn please." She took a deep, shaky breath. "I'll show you. All of you. Let the phone ring. Just let it ring. Think I'll answer it? It can ring from now till doomsday. Ring and ring. Rrrrrring!" She raised a hand and fluttered it like a bird at the telephone.

Then she picked up the glass again, and this time she emptied it.

She put the glass down, picked up the bottle with both hands and shakily poured more of the tan fluid into the glass.

TERRY clamped his teeth together and tightened his whole body to stifle the tremor in his chest.

He spoke:

"Please don't drink any more."

"Mind your own business," said Miss Harrington.

She put the bottle down and reached for the glass. Her hand stopped midway.

"Who said that?" she choked.

Terry spoke gently. "I said it. Terry."

Miss Harrington clapped her hand across her mouth and looked at him with huge eyes.

"No," she said hoarsely through her fingers. "No."

"Please don't be frightened," Terry said.

Miss Harrington closed her eyes tightly. She lifted the glass and took a long drink. She put the glass down and slowly opened her eyes again.

"I've always been able to talk," Terry said. "I've had to hide it from you."

The fright went out of her face. Her lips wrinkled. "You think I'm crazy?" she said. "You think I think I'm hearing something? You think I don't know I'm drunk?"

"But I *am* talking," Terry said anxiously. "I really am. All dogs can talk. I want *you* to know it—but please don't tell anybody else. Dogs are actually smarter than people."

Miss Harrington suddenly began to laugh. Shrilly, triumphantly. "The first time I've ever really been drunk! It's wonderful! Wonderful!" She stood up unsteadily and spread her arms wide. "I don't

care about anything! I'm stewed. I'm stewed to the gills. Nothing can bother me! Nothing. Go ahead—talk! Talking dogs. Flying cats. Wheeee!"

She moved away from the chair, her arms outstretched. "I'm a bird!" she sang out. "I can fly. Wheeee!"

"Miss Harrington—you'll get hurt!" Terry cried.

"Nothing can hurt me. I'm feeling no pain. I'm a bird. A bi-i-ird!"

"Oh, please sit down," Terry wailed. "You'll get hurt."

"Shut up—you worry too much!" She floated around the room on tiptoe. "Get out of my way, you—you talking dog!"

Terry scampered out of the path of her high-heeled pumps. "Please—please listen to me. I've been wanting to tell you for years. All dogs can talk. Dogs are smarter than people."

"Sure they are," she mumbled. "Goldfish are smarter than people. Everything's smarter than people."

"No, *nó*," Terry said desperately. "Just dogs—"

She rounded the coffee table and sat down with a bump on the sofa. "Whooo!" she said.

Slowly her arms drooped to her sides. Her eyelids drooped. She fell face down, *plop!* on the sofa. Fast asleep in an instant . . .

Terry thought, Well, now she knows! And he went out to the kitchen to eat supper.



NEXT morning, Miss Harrington was awake before Terry was. He stirred on his mat when he heard her sloshing in the shower. He jumped up and ran out into the hall to wait for her. She came out of the bathroom, looking haggard and hurried. She walked quickly past him and down the stairs. In a moment, she was bustling in the kitchen. When Terry came in, she already had dumped a can of dog food into his tray.

Before Terry could figure out the best way to resume the unsatisfactory conversation of the evening before, Miss Harrington was out the door, running down the street for the bus. He watched her from the window. It was just as well, he thought—this rushed moment was no time to take up such a matter. Better to wait until she came home from work and they could sit down, quiet and relaxed. Meanwhile, he'd have time to prepare a more orderly presentation than his haphazard first attempt . . .

But when she came home, and he went running to the door, barking and wagging his tail in regulation fashion, he found that Miss Harrington wasn't alone. The tall, black-haired, thick-eyebrowed man named Roger was with her. They both looked very chipper. Miss Harrington stooped and grasped Terry's paws and roughed

him up gaily and tweaked his ears and called him "you terrycloth cutie," the way she always did when she was feeling good.

Then she stood up and took Roger's hand and led him into the living room. His thick black eyebrows rose when he saw the bottle and the glass on the coffee table.

"Yes—you drove me to drink," Miss Harrington said half-defiantly, half-humorously.

"You little brown-eyed idiot," Roger said laughing. "Couldn't you possibly imagine I might have been sent out of town?" He threw his arms around her waist, pulled her close, and started in on a determined kiss.

Terry ran around them, barking, the way he knew he was expected to do when anybody laid a hand on Miss Harrington.

Miss Harrington giggled. "He'll get used to you."

"Yes, but the question is, will I get used to him? Because I'm marrying you, do I have to marry the dog, too?"

Miss Harrington led Roger to the sofa. "He's a very smart dog," she said. "You'll love him."

"What's so smart about him?"

"Just look at him," she said proudly. "Can't you see the intelligence in his face? After you've been around him a while, you'll get the feeling he understands everything you say. Really, I think

in some ways dogs are smarter than people."

Terry stiffened in horror.

She was *telling* this he-Bloop!

"What makes you say that?" Roger said.

"Oh, I don't know. I just have the feeling—I can't exactly explain it. But I think the only thing they can't do is ta . . ."

She stopped, her lips apart. Her eyes grew big and round and haunted.

"Do you know what?" she exclaimed. "Last night, when I was drunk, I actually thought the dog was talking!"

Terry swayed in agony. She was telling him. She couldn't keep a secret. The other Edorians were right. She would tell this Bloop everything . . . and soon the whole world would know.

"Talking dogs, eh?" Roger said.

"Just shows you how smart I think he is," Miss Harrington said.

"Okay, he's smart," Roger said. "He's a genius. I'm going to give him a chance to prove it. From now on—that is, as soon as I become the head of this house—this mutt starts earning his keep. If he's as smart as you say, he's smart enough to learn how to bring in the paper in the morning. And the mail. We can train him to meet the postman. And why can't you stick a shopping basket between his teeth and put your grocery list in it and send him down

to the store and have the grocer fill your order?"

"But, Roger, we can't—"

"I never could see this business of using your hard-earned pay to support a dog in idleness," Roger said. "It's a racket. Why shouldn't the mutt work his way, same as I do? I don't see why he can't dig up worms for me when I go fishing. Dogs are digging all the time anyway—might as well have something useful to dig for. And I think I'll show him the way to my tobacco shop—he can bring me pipe tobacco when I run out. And when we have a kid, we can hitch the mutt up to a little wagon and . . ."

WHEN Terry goes trotting down the street with a market basket between his teeth, the other dogs of the neighborhood almost always stop what they are doing and line up to watch him. They bring their puppies out, too. He is a perfect illustration of the hazards of violating, or even thinking of violating, the oath all dogs take.

"Does that hand me a laugh!" some of the dogs say.

"Poetic justice, that's what it is," comment others.

Except, of course, if there are any Bloops around.

Joseph Shallet

Can such beauty be?

*The trick, you see, is to find
work for the Devil's idle hands!*

By JEROME BIXBY

ON March 11, 1929, while tottering barefoot over a vast expanse of white-hot coals in everlasting efforts to reach a sparkling stream of clear, cold water that really wasn't there, the damned soul of Mrs. Elbert M. Trumbull abruptly stiffened in its tracks and turned its eyes upward. A look of wonder and expectation replaced that of hopeless suffering. The soul emitted a sound that unmistakably smacked of glee, and shot upward, seeming to dwindle in size rather more than could be

accounted for by its rapid ascent to, and through, the roof of Hell.

The demon who reported the matter to His Illustrious Foulness was understandably incoherent. Damned souls simply did not fly away through the roof of Hell. They stayed, and screamed, and suffered endlessly. The thing was without precedent—and Hell was in a bad way if this set one now.

HIS Illustrious Foulness blew his stack. He swore and stamped and kicked his bronze

Illustrated by KOSSIN

throne. He committed the reporting demon, and all those fiends and demons who had been on duty at the Area of Torment in question, to six months in solitary, with only holy water to drink and a Bible for recreation. They left, wailing.

Then he put in a call to Heaven.

"Just what," he roared, the instant the connection was made, "is going on up there? One of my souls just escaped, and the circumstances reek of reincarnation! It was observed to shrink to baby-size, just as it flew through the roof. Damn it all, you know it's strictly against policy for any of my souls to be reincarnated!"

The cherubim at the Heavenly Switchboard put his call through to the Recording Angel, who claimed no knowledge of the matter. The Devil's strong language soon caused the Angel to hang up in a huff, after first informing His Illustrious Foulness that no slightest attempt would conceivably ever be made by anyone in Heaven to have reincarnated any soul from the nether realm; that such lost souls scarcely qualified for the honor, and that in any case no one named Mrs. Elbert M. Trumbull was or ever had been scheduled for it; that the Devil had blessed 'well better look around for another explanation.

Grumbling, the Devil ordered a triple-check on the incident, which

revealed nothing. The soul had simply vanished—perhaps Earthward, to resume mortal form, though, on the basis of the evidence, reincarnation seemed not to be the answer. At any rate, there was no possibility of tracing the soul.

If it *had* been reincarnated, then it was quite beyond grasp till the incarnation was over; while if the Recording Angel had been leveling and the soul had not been reincarnated, then not even God knew where it could be, and certainly the Devil could not bother scouring the Universe for it.

Snarling, he took the obvious step of rendering Hell even more escapeproof than it had been—by doubling the guards and turning up the fires along the boundaries—and tried to forget the whole thing.

MONTHS passed. The offending demons and fiends were released from solitary, with time off for bad behavior. They returned to their guard duties, which you may be sure they performed with utmost care, wanting no more of that holy water. They were seen to swizzle extraordinary amounts of lava during the next few weeks, as if wishing to rid themselves of a good taste.

Years passed. Souls came and sorrowfully entered into eternal torment. Demons howled, and

thrust red-hot pitchforks at *derrières*. Fires flamed, and sulphur stank.

The Devil sat his throne and ruled his realm with magnificent cruelty, and amused himself off-hours by researching a project that had interested him for some centuries—that of traveling through Time.

In the back of his infernal mind was the notion of someday returning to the Original Battleground, forearmed with hindsight as it were, licking the pants off the Heavenly Hosts and pulling a switch on history.

On July 2, 1953, something happened that had not happened for a Hell of a long time: a mortal drew the right sort of star, inside the right sort of circle, with the right sort of chalk, and said the right sort of gobbledegook.

His Illustrious Foulness was plucked like a guppy from the middle of an important ways-and-means conference and whisked up to the mortal plane to consult there with some brave mortal who evidently had reason to barter its soul.

NIGHTTIME, fog, a glistening London street. Big Ben struck eleven.

"Good Heavens," a young man's voice said. "Can such beauty be?"

The yellow glow of the street-light, made hazy by the fog, showed

that she was indeed beautiful. Also, hardly of the highest intellectual caliber. Her eyes, as she turned them in the direction of the young man, had all the depth and animation of a wax-work Elizabeth's.

"Was you addressin' me, guv'nor?" she said.

"Indeed I was . . . Please forgive me, miss—I know it's not proper, but I spoke without thinking. Oh, I *do* beg your pardon, but you are the loveliest woman I have ever seen. Rome, Cairo, Vienna, Paris—never have I seen such exquisite beauty!"

Her beautiful face broke into a beautiful smile, a discouragingly suspicious smile, an encouragingly stupid smile. "Ga'rn. You toffs 're all alike, comin' around with your fancy talk and tryin' to get a girl to forget her good ways. Ga'rn, or I'll yell f'r a bobby."

The young man, whose name was Peter Trumbull—of the Boston and Long Island Trumbulls, filthy rich—said, "Oh, no, I beg of you. Don't do that. I have no intention of bothering you, really. I'll go on, as you wish, in just a moment. I assure you that I am not the sort of man who goes around at night accosting strange young ladies . . . especially young ladies of such obvious breeding and respectability as yourself, if I may say so."

The stupid, beautiful smile.

"Well-l-l, now, I guess you may, at that. Now, off with you, or—"

"Oh, but first let me *really* look at you. Please—one full picture of your loveliness to take away with me into the night. Come here, child—here below the streetlight."

TAKING her elbows, Peter Trumbull steered her into the illumination. He peered into her face, noted the full and wonderfully formed lips, the skin smooth as new cream, the blue eyes with their luscious tones of gray and green, the soft yellow hair upon which trembled tiny beads of moisture caught from the fog. With practiced eye he analyzed the expression on her face right down to the last millimetrical nuance. It was pleased, it was flattered—and still wary. And without a doubt she hadn't a brain in her head. Not much will power, either. She had come along readily enough to stand under the light. Without being obvious about it, he dropped his eyes, and saw a bosom so full and shapely, even under her rather shabby coat, as to curl his fingers into iron hooks.

Now he closed his eyes, as if transported by the vision of her beauty. Apparently drawn by magnets more potent than any mortal male could resist, his hands touched her cheeks, pressed tenderly.

"My Heavens," he whispered,

and with his eyes still shut, swayed a little. "You're ten times lovelier than I thought. You remind me of my dear old mother—none was lovelier than she—though I've only seen her portraits, poor thing, she departed this world as I entered. Oh, would I could paint a portrait—were a painter, a sculptor, even a photographer. Seized with inspiration as I am at this divine moment, I would take you to my flat and—"

"Now, guvnor," she said, cheeks moving like satin beneath his thrilled fingertips. "I can still 'oller for that bobby, you know—"

"Oh, no. I would *paint* you, my child, and, as I said, seized with inspiration as I am, I'm sure it would be one of the masterpieces of all time!"

At last she simpered. *About time*, he thought.

"Well, now, be that as it may, guvnor, I really oughter go—"

"**J**UST another moment," he said, pressing the cheeks lightly and noting with satisfaction that she stayed . . . these dumb ones were usually good hypnotics. "Alas, my dear, I am *not* an artist, though God knows my father saw to it that I had enough instruction to make me a dozen. I am only—" he spread his hands eloquently, brought them back instantly to her cheeks—"only a man. A lonely man, in this strange land, on this

strange street—a man who in this brief moment has been swept, nay, borne aloft! into an enchanted fairyland, where the fog and the dark are no more, before the shining sun of your loveliness.”

The smile again.

A moment's silence.

“You're American, ain't you? You talk like one.”

She'd ventured a word! *She'll give*, he thought.

“Yes,” he said. “Over on a short stay, and now that I've seen you . . . an unforgettable one.”

Her name, she told him over tea and cakes in a joint off the Circus, was Mary Dingle. He told her that it was a beautiful name, as singularly beautiful as its owner. The smile. She lived southside, but had been born in Liverpool. *How* had Liverpool allowed such a fair flower to escape? The smile. She worked in a shoe factory. *What!* Not an actress, a showgirl . . . at the very least a model? The smile.

When they got to the door of his flat, she hung back a little, the smile now uncertain, eyes a little glazed by his flow of flattery.

But she simply *must* come in and meet Sis. It would be dreadfully disappointing for Sis to hear all about such an interesting and exciting person and never get to meet her. The smile.

Sis wasn't home, naturally. Naturally . . . Sis didn't exist.

Wouldn't Mary wait to meet Sis? . . . Sis must have just stepped out for a second.

Well-I-I . . . s'pose so.

A drink in the meantime?

Another?

Another?

Let's relax on the couch.

Another?

Oh, come, let's do the bottle.

YOU really remind me most amazingly of my mother . . . how beautiful she was. How beautiful *you* are. Poor dear mother, marrying senile old father. Must've been after his money, you know. Really a wonder he ever manufactured me, at his age. Don't you think it must be frightful to be senile?

He had to explain what senile meant, as he'd hoped he might. This he did in a roundabout fashion, beginning with youth and its clean and wholesome glories of the flesh, so stifled by meaningless mores, and ending with senility and all one had lost in that abysmal and inevitable state, and how short life was, really, and live while you may.

Well, guv'nor . . . I wouldn't rightly know if it was awful or not. I s'pose it . . . I mean, I've 'ad no experience in such . . . I mean . . . S'pose I oughter go, maybe I could meet your sister some other . . .

One more moment, then . . .

Let me drink one last sip of your beauty. You have such beautiful hair . . . Let me touch it . . . And those sweet little shell-like ears . . . You know, this really isn't like me at all, but I—I'm tempted to—I *will*—I can't stop myself—I'll nibble that ear!

She trembled like a twig in a gale, and then like a twig in a hurricane, and objected for a second to progressively more wondrous enterprises he undertook, and then Peter Trumbull achieved his heart's desire.

What strategem to adopt afterwards? Obviously, the Oh-God-what-have-I-done, can-you-forgive-me one. He wept. Soon, she had stopped her own weeping and was consoling him. He moaned he was sorry. How could he have done it? That's all right, she said: you didn't mean any 'arm, it just 'apened, that's all.

When she left, it was considerably elevated by her efforts to pull him through the emotional crisis he had brought upon himself by so impetuously abusing her, and with all the vague feelings of tenderness and understanding and Acceptance of Fate that a girl like her feels when a man like him has worked his wiles, and with the promise that they would meet tomorrow in the park.

Not on your sweet life, Peter Trumbull thought as he went to sleep with a happy little smile:

tomorrow I'm on the boat and on my way back to good old Boston, and so long, Mary.

WHEN Peter didn't meet her in the park the next day, or the day after that, Mary Dingle went to his flat and was informed of his departure to America. Feeling quite wronged, but not too desperately unhappy (Granny had warned about men) she went about her business.

Several months later, the encounter was compounded by discovery of her interesting condition.

What was a poor girl to do? Her salary was barely enough to keep her roofed and fed, with a pound a week going off to Granny in Liverpool. So it was hardly possible to fly to America in pursuit of the father-to-be. Besides, thinking it all over, even her limited powers of calculation were sufficient to tell her that Peter Trumbull was just the type to brush her off should she appear at his doorstep with a bundle.

Oh, the dog, she thought, the dirty dog. 'E's done me proper, and now 'e's gone so I can't get 'im to do me right.

Now Mary Dingle was, in more than one respect, an unusual girl. Her beauty, for one thing. For another, she was extremely determined, though never about much of anything you or I would think

important. And, within the framework of her small array of knowledge and limited mental prowess, she was resourceful. The few data that managed to seep through the stony barriers which fate had placed about her brain were used with fair sense and often with shrewdness.

Probably the most unusual thing about her was that she had managed to include an interest in the occult.

Granny was solely responsible for this. Granny was a mysterious old woman—a little potty, if the truth be known—and the tales she had told Mary as a child had stuck. Tales of leprechauns, of druids, of vampires and werewolves and a demon or two, and the lot of them sworn to be true—indeed, to be personal experiences—and perhaps they were, who can say?

Granny had had books, also old and mysterious, and she had often read to Mary from them, and when Mary had come to London the books had come with her, as Granny was getting too old to read, and getting religion, besides. Now it was Mary's custom to peruse them and think upon their revelations, particularly on weekends, on the supposition that they contained a great deal that one should know about life. They were among her earliest recollections, you see, and so little had been added to those subsequently, that few distinctions

had been drawn between fact and fancy to make anything at all appear unlikely.

WE almost always take recourse to the familiar. So, as Mary Dingle's interesting condition developed—and her concern as to her fate—she thought to appeal to the occult powers to help her out.

Half-measures wouldn't do. Mary decided to enlist the aid of the Devil himself. Books came out, and the ritual was gotten down pat, and the plan of coercion was formulated.

Mary drew the right sort of star, in the right sort of circle, with the right sort of chalk, and said the right sort of gobbledegook.

The Devil appeared, a sheaf of smoking asbestos paper in one hand. Without looking up, he read on: "—and it is therefore evident that stricter measures must be taken with the souls on Level B-1956399, if discipline is to be—"

He paused, startled, sniffed the air, looked up and saw Mary Dingle cringing back against the bureau. His glowing eyes widened. He snorted sulphurous smoke. He looked down and saw the starred circle.

"Well, by the heartwarming screams of a flayed thing," he said, scowling. "Called me right up, didn't you, child? That took nerve!"

"Y-y-yes, guvnor."

"H'm. London, I suppose." His eyes narrowed, and two beams of bright, hard, red light struck out and passed through Mary's own eyes and seemed to scrape the back of her skull.

She closed her eyes. "Don't you try nothin' funny, now, guvnor. I've read about your tricks, and you won't get anywhere."

The Devil sighed, a sound like a file on glass. "All right, child. I'm hooked, fair and square. What can I do for you?"

She told him about Peter Trumbull and her interesting condition.

THE Devil smiled slyly. "Ah," he said, "I see no reason to help you, child. You've nothing to offer me. You cannot barter your soul, for your sin has made it mine already!" And he laughed a very cruel laugh, and lashed his tail.

"I know that," Mary said. "But I'll give you a reason, right enough, all right. You're in that circle, guvnor, and there you stay until you 'elp me! I can keep you there as long as I like!"

The Devil's jaw dropped. "You wouldn't!"

"I would."

"It's never been done!"

"I'll do it."

The Devil studied her closely for a moment, frowning. "Yes, indeed, I suppose you could. But it

wouldn't help you at all with your problem, would it? And I assure you that your entire lifetime, even if you chose to spend it beside this circle in which you have trapped me, would be no more than a flickering instant to me."

"Oh, I know that too. But I'll just bet you wouldn't like waitin', even my lifetime. You've got too much to do. I've read 'ow busy you are, and things in 'ell would be in a fine state if you was to take fifty years off. Besides, I wouldn't just sit 'ere. Don't you think it! I'd borrow some money and rent this 'ole 'ouse and *charge admission*—'ow would you like *that* guvnor?"

The Devil considered, rubbing his jaw with his tail. "H'm. It's an ingenious threat," he said at last. "No, I shouldn't like that at all. It would be humiliating beyond endurance. Then, too, I'd be driven out of my mind by people trying to destroy me—technological age, and all that." He scowled at Mary, and she retreated a step. "All right! What do you want?"

"Peter Trumbull. I want 'im back, so 'e can do right by me."

"That's all?"

"That's all."

YOU'RE really rather fortunate, you know," the Devil mused. "Your immortal soul is already mine, or will be when you



CAN SUCH BEAUTY BE?

die; yet here you are in a position to bargain with me for anything you wish to have during your mortal existence. Unusual, to say the least."

"I only want Peter Trumbull. I got to 'ave him. I'm a respectable girl, and 'e's done me proper, and now I got to 'ave 'im. Get 'im back for me . . . or 'ere you'll stay."

"H'm," said His Illustrious Foulness. He closed his eyes and was silent a moment. He seemed somehow in communication. Then he smiled evilly. "I'm afraid that's quite impossible. Your Peter Trumbull fell overboard from the ship that was taking him back to America. He's been in Hell for some months now."

"Oh," Mary wailed. "That's gone and done it! Now my poor baby will be born without no father, and I'll be the disgrace of my family, and I'll walk the rest of my life 'angin' my 'ead, and—" She paused and narrowed her beautiful eyes at the Devil. "Now, look 'ere, you just *do* somethin'—You got powers. You do somethin' about this, guv'nor, or I'll—"

"But it's impossible," the Devil snapped. "What can I do? Peter Trumbull is dead. No one returns from Hell. And I have important business to attend to. If you'll please release me, I'll be gone."

Mary Dingle sat down on the edge of the bed and folded her arms. "Do somethin'!"

"But—"

"Oh, I know 'ow to persuade you, all right." Mary picked up the Bible she'd put on the bed and started to read. The Devil shuddered and shrank back until his tail touched a portion of the starred circle. There was a flash, and a snapcrackle, and he yelped in pain.

"Do somethin'," Mary said. "—'And after these things I 'eard a great voice of much people in 'eaven, sayin' 'Alleluja; Salvation, and glory, and 'onor, and power, unto the Lord our God'—do somethin', guv'nor, or you'll be mighty sorry."

THE Devil gnashed his teeth, and sparks flew. "Oh, I'll enjoy the moment I get my hands on you! I'll develop several horrible punishments that till now I've only contemplated!"

"Be that as it may, you do somethin' right now about Peter, or else! I guess my soul is lost 'anyway, so I want to live a fine old life while I got it. Peter Trumbull's rich, and that don't 'urt any!"

"But I tell you, it's utterly impossible to return a soul from Hell! Only once has a soul escaped, and the incident is still a complete mys—" The Devil was suddenly very still for a moment. His jaw dropped. "Trumbull? Trumbull?" He spat flaming sulphur, which fell to the carpet and

commenced to eat a hole. "TRUMBULL is the young man's name?"

"Peter Trumbull," she said calmly. "I want to 'ave Peter Trumbull . . . and 'is money."

The Devil stared at her with his malevolent and crafty expression and said slowly, "Ah, now I begin to understand something that happened quite some time ago. Yes, indeed, I *do* understand." He looked up at the ceiling and began to grin a fiendish grin.

"Don't you try nothin' funny, now, guv'nor," Mary said nervously.

"Oh, no. Not at *all*. I wouldn't *think* of it. Why, I'm going to grant your wish, child. It's absolutely necessary that I do, for many reasons, some of which you wouldn't understand."

"Best reason is I've got you 'ere, ain't it? Now you get busy—"

"Oh, yes, that's a good one. A very good one. But a better one is that, in a sense, I've *already* done it. So now I must *do* it. Ah, yes, I must have done—or must do now—what I'm about to do—because I once did."

Mary bit her lovely lip.

"Since what happened," the Devil went on, "*did* happen, I must now *make* it happen. Badness sakes, I just hope no word of this seeps up to my Brother—it might alert him to the fact that I'm meddling with Time. *Now—*" he

stretched up to his full height and flapped his tail about so menacingly that Mary flipped backwards across the bed with a muffled scream—"you want to have Peter Trumbull?"

"Y-yes."

"And you want the Trumbull millions?"

"Y-yes."

Whisht!

MARY DINGLE, unremembering, found herself in bed in a big, lovely home on Long Island, in America. Here she had lived for two years (she thought). Ever since '24, when she'd married old Trumbull for his dough (she thought).

Her loving, doddering husband, Elbert M. Trumbull, was just phoning his private physicians, looking pleased and proud. This was the day! This would show those idiots who'd diagnosed false pregnancy! He'd show them, by God, that a Trumbull was good to the very end! He'd given his lovely young wife a child (he thought), and labor was commencing.

Actually, all these thoughts, and many, many more, had been instantaneously implanted in their minds by His Illustrious Foulness, in the brief instant he'd spent on Long Island before returning to Hell. Actually, Mary Dingle had just appeared out of thin air in the palatial home of old Trumbull, the

bachelor, and he'd been flabbergasted before the Devil fixed things up.

Actually, they weren't married. Actually, no doctors had examined her, or diagnosed her condition one way or the other. Actually, the entire complex situation as it appeared to its protagonists had been fabricated by the Devil and implanted in Mary's mind, and in old Elbert's, and in the doctors', and in the minds of everyone even remotely connected with Elbert and his lovely young "wife." So no one was ever the wiser.

All the paraphernalia necessary to Mary's role in the quasi-situation—clothing, toilet articles, the marriage certificate, her own birth certificate, even a portrait or two by the very best artists . . . just about everything that accumulates as a person lives a life—had been created and put in their proper places by His Illustrious Foulness. So, in an unreal sense, the situation was real; and that seems good enough for most people anyway.

Thus, for a few hours, "Mrs. Elbert M. Trumbull" enjoyed the Trumbull wealth. Small good it did her, though. And later that day, as she had so fervently wished, she had Peter Trumbull. He weighed six pounds, seven ounces. Then, from complications, she died. Old Elbert wept and mourned, and Mary Dingle, by reason

of her peculiar sins, went to Hell faster and with more of a pratfall at the end of the trip than anyone in the memory of the receiving demon.

The Devil, quite naturally, never achieved his desire to practice advanced punishments upon her. For the date of her arrival was January 27, 1926, and she was just another soul, and His Illustrious Foulness would have no notion for some time hence that she was anything at all out of the ordinary.

So three years passed, and Mary's damned soul vanished with a gleeful sound to be born in Liverpool, and the Devil swore and puzzled, and Mary grew up, went to London, walked a foggy street and met Peter Trumbull, shortly after which the Devil was himself summoned to London, where, as you have read, he recognized the Time circuit for what it must be, and chuckling with fiendish mirth sent Mary back to bear her own lover-to-be, who was twenty-seven years later to become his own father, and so on around and around.

AFTER leaving Long Island and returning to 1953, the Devil mused on his way back to Hell. Obviously there was nothing to be done about Mary Dingle, short of going back though Time again and multiplying her torments during her three-year stay. And doing so

wasn't worth the risk, for it might, in some way, warn the Heavenly Hosts that he was fooling around with Time and might be planning, as he certainly was, eventually to return after centuries of preparation and start the great battle all over again and this time win it. Enough risk had been taken already, though it had been quite necessary: the girl had had him on the spot, and moreover, the wheels of Time had obviously demanded that he move as he had to account for the hitherto inexplicable disappearance of the soul of Mrs. Elbert M. Trumbull.

MARY DINGLE all things considered, got off damned easy, to put it literally. It goes to show that while no one bests the Devil, some may get the better of him. Three years in Hell is hardly enough to discourage even the smallest of sins. And though Mary certainly hadn't very much time to enjoy her life as Mrs. Trumbull, she had lived a fairly pleasant if abbreviated life as plain Mary Dingle, or would, and besides, she'd never really wanted much out of life, or wouldn't. So we will leave her going around and around in Time, and it is better not to puzzle on that.

For the next six hundred years the Devil took pains to see that Peter Trumbull got the very worst Hell had to offer, thus trying to

work off a part of his irritation at the whole affair. However, Peter was one of the most unrepentant and unregenerate scoundrels ever to enter the place, and at last, in a moment of utter fury before which discretion fled, the Devil informed him that he was his own father (expecting the news to shatter the man, in accordance with prevailing Earthly notions on such matters). Far from being shattered, or even fazed, Peter laughed long and loud, and spread the story around so that eventually it reached the ears of a small and unobtrusive demon who, beneath false horns and tail, was in reality a spy from Above.

So at the end of those six hundred years, when at last the Devil felt equipped to sally into the past and do battle with his Brother, the Heavenly Hosts were forewarned, and succeeded in ambushing him and stranding him in a parallel time continuum, where he probably wanders still.

. . . And soon Satan will return to be thus trapped, and Hell should go to pot without his rulership, and the world should be a pretty wonderful place without his dastardly influence, and . . .

Good Heavens! Can such beauty be?

TALENT

By THEODORE STURGEON



Illustrated by BARTH

MRS. Brent and Precious were sitting on the farmhouse porch when little Jokey sidled out from behind the barn and came catfooting up to them. Precious, who had ringlets and was seven years old and very clean, stopped swinging on the glider and watched him. Mrs. Brent was reading a magazine. Jokey stopped at the foot of the steps.

"MOM!" he rasped.

Mrs. Brent started violently, rocked too far back, bumped her knobby hairdo against the clapboards, and said, "Good heavens, you little br— darling, you frightened me!"

Jokey smiled.

Precious said, "Snaggletooth."

"If you want your mother," said Mrs. Brent reasonably, "why don't you go inside and speak to her?"

Disgustedly, Jokey vetoed the suggestion with "Ah-h-h . . ." He faced the house. "MOM!" he shrieked, in a tone that spoke of death and disaster.

*Exterminating pests was
Jokey's specialty—and he
was 100% efficient at it!*

There was a crash from the kitchen, and light footsteps. Jokey's mother, whose name was Mrs. Purney, came out, pushing back a wisp of hair from frightened eyes.

"Oh, the sweet," she cooed. She flew out and fell on her knees beside Jokey. "Did it hurt its little, then? Aw, did it was . . ."

Jokey said, "Gimme a nickel!"

"Please," suggested Precious.

"Of course, darling," fluttered Mrs. Purney. "My word, yes. Just as soon as ever we go into town, you shall have a nickel. Two, if you're good."

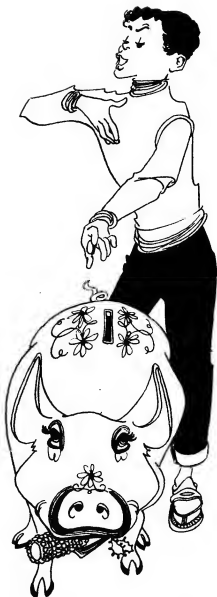
"Gimme a nickel," said Jokey ominously.

"But, darling, what for? What will you do with a nickel out here?"

JOKEY thrust out his hand. "I'll hold my breath."

Mrs. Purney rose, panicked. "Oh, dear, don't. Oh, please don't. Where's my reticule?"

"On top of the bookcase, out of my reach," said Precious, without rancor.



"Oh, yes, so it is. Now, Jokey, you wait right here and I'll just . . ." and her twittering faded into the house.

Mrs. Brent cast her eyes upward and said nothing.

"You're a little stinker," said Precious.

Jokey looked at her with dignity. "Mom," he called imperiously.

Mrs. Purney came to heel on the instant, bearing a nickel.

Jokey, pointing with the same movement with which he acquired the coin, reported, "She called me a little stinker."

"Really!" breathed Mrs. Purney, bridling. "I think, Mrs. Brent, that your child could have better manners."

"She has, Mrs. Purney, and uses them when they seem called for."

Mrs. Purney looked at her curiously, decided, apparently, that Mrs. Brent meant nothing by the statement (in which she was wrong) and turned to her son, who was walking briskly back to the barn.

"Don't hurt yourself, Puddles," she called.

She elicited no response whatever, and, smiling vaguely at Mrs. Brent and daughter, went back to her kitchen.

"Puddles," said Precious ruminatively. "I bet I know why she calls him that. Remember Gladys's puppy that—"

"Precious," said Mrs. Brent, "you shouldn't have called Joachim a word like that."

"I s'pose not," Precious agreed thoughtfully. "He's really a—"

Mrs. Brent, watching the carven pink lips, said warningly, "Precious!" She shook her head. "I've asked you not to say that."

"Daddy—"

"Daddy caught his thumb in the hinge of the car-trunk. That was different."

"Oh, no," corrected Precious. "You're thinking of the time he opened on'y the bottom half of the Dutch door in the dark. When he pinched his thumb, he said—"

"Would you like to see my magazine?"

Precious rose and stretched delicately. "No, thank you, Mummy. I'm going out to the barn to see what Jokey's going to do with that nickel."

"Precious . . ."

"Yes, Mummy."

"Oh—nothing. I suppose it's all right. Don't quarrel with Jokey, now."

"Not 'less he quarrels with me," she replied, smiling charmingly.

PRECIOUS had new patent-leather shoes with hard heels and broad ankle-straps. They looked neat and very shiny against her yellow socks. She walked carefully in the path, avoiding the moist grasses that nodded over the

edges, stepping sedately over a small muddy patch.

Jokey was not in the barn. Precious walked through, smelling with pleasure the mixed, warm smells of chaff-dust, dry hay and manure. Just outside, by the wagon-door, was the pigpen. Jokey was standing by the rail fence. At his feet was a small pile of green apples. He picked one up and hurled it with all his might at the brown sow. It went *putt!* on her withers, and she went *ergh!*

"Hey!" said Precious.

Putt-ergh! Then he looked up at Precious, snarled silently, and picked up another apple. *Putt-ergh!*

"Why are you doing that for?"

Putt-ergh!

"Hear that? My mom done just like that when I hit her in the stummick."

"She did?"

"Now this," said Jokey, holding up an apple, "is a stone. Listen." He hurled it. *Thunk-e-e-e-ergh!*

Precious was impressed. Her eyes widened, and she stepped back a pace.

"Hey, look out where you're goin', stoopid!"

He ran to her and grasped her left biceps roughly, throwing her up against the railings. She yelped and stood rubbing her arm—rubbing off grime, and far deeper in indignation than she was in fright.

Jokey paid her no attention.

"You an' your shiny feet," he growled. He was down on one knee, feeling for two twigs stuck in the ground about eight inches apart. "Y'might've squashed 'em!"

Precious, her attention brought to her new shoes, stood turning one of them, glancing light from the toecaps, from the burnished sides, while complacency flowed back into her.

"What?"

WITH the sticks, Jokey scratched aside the loose earth and, one by one, uncovered the five tiny, naked, blind creatures which lay buried there. They were only about three-quarters of an inch long, with little withered limbs and twitching noses. They writhed. There were ants, too. Very busy ants.

"What are they?"

"Mice, stoopid," said Jokey. "Baby mice. I found 'em in the barn."

"How did they get there?"

"I put 'em there."

"How long have they been there?"

"'Bout four days," said Jokey, covering them up again. "They last a long time."

"Does your mother know those mice are out here?"

"No, and you better not say nothin', ya hear?"

"Would your mother whipyou?"

"Her?" The syllable came out

as an incredulous jeer.

"What about your father?"

"Aw, I guess he'd like to lick me. But he ain't got a chance. Mom'd have a fit."

"You mean she'd get mad at him?"

"No, stoopid. A fit. You know, scrabbles at the air and get suds on her mouth, and all. Falls down and twitches." He chuckled.

"But—why?"

"Well, it's about the on'y way she can handle Pop, I guess. He's always wanting to do something about me. She won't let 'um, so I c'n do anything I want."

"What do you do?"

"I'm talunted. Mom says so."

"Well, what do you do?"

"You're sorta nosy."

"I don't believe you can do anything, stinky."

"Oh, I can't?" Jokey's face was reddening.

"No, you can't! You talk a lot, but you can't really do anything."

Jokey walked up close to her and breathed in her face the way the man with the grizzly beard does to the clean-cut cowboy who is tied up to the dynamite kegs in the movies on Saturday.

"I can't, huh?"

SHE stood her ground. "All right, if you're so smart, let's see what you were going to do with that nickel!"

Surprisingly, he looked abashed.

"You'd laugh," he said.

"No, I wouldn't," she said guilelessly. She stepped forward, opened her eyes very wide, shook her head so that her gold ringlets swayed, and said very gently, "Truly I wouldn't, Jokey . . ."

"Well—" he said, and turned to the pigpen. The brindled sow was rubbing her shoulder against the railing, grunting softly to herself. She vouchsafed them one small red-rimmed glance, and returned to her thoughts.

Jokey and Precious stood up on the lower rail and looked down on the pig's broad back.

"You're not goin' to tell anybody?" he asked.

"Course not."

"Well, awright. Now lookit. You ever see a china piggy bank?"

"Sure I have," said Precious.

"How big?"

"Well, I got one about this big."

"Aw, that's nothin'."

"And my girl-friend Gladys has one *this* big."

"Phooey."

"Well," said Precious, "in town, in a big drugstore, I saw one **THIS** big," and she put out her hands about thirty inches apart.

"That's pretty big," admitted Jokey. "Now I'll show you *something*." To the brindled sow, he said sternly, "You are a piggy bank."

The sow stopped rubbing her-

self against the rails. She stood quite still. Her bristles merged into her hide. She was hard and shiny—as shiny as the little girl's hard shoes. In the middle of the broad back, a slot appeared—or had been there all along, as far as Precious could tell. Jokey produced a warm sweaty nickel and dropped it into the slot.

There was a distant, vitreous, hollow bouncing click from inside the sow.

MRS. Purney came out on the porch and creaked into a wicker chair with a tired sigh.

"They are a handful, aren't they?" said Mrs. Brent.

"You just don't know," moaned Mrs. Purney.

Mrs. Brent's eyebrows went up. "Precious is a model. Her teacher says so. That wasn't too easy to do."

"Yes, she's a very good little girl. But my Joachim is—uh, talented, you know. That makes it very hard."

"How is he talented? What can he do?"

"He can do anything," said Mrs. Purney after a slight hesitation.

Mrs. Brent glanced at her, saw that her tired eyes were closed, and shrugged. It made her feel better. Why must mothers always insist that their children are better than all others?

"Now, my Precious," she said,

"—and mind you, I'm not saying this because she's my child—my Precious plays the piano very well for a child her age. Why, she's already in her third book and she's not eight yet."

Mrs. Purney said, without opening her eyes, "Jokey doesn't play. I'm sure he could if he wanted to."

Mrs. Brent saw what an inclusive boast this might be, and wisely refrained from further itemization. She took another tack. "Don't you find, Mrs. Purney, that it is easy to make a child obedient and polite by being firm?"

Mrs. Purney opened her eyes at last, and looked troubledly at Mrs. Brent. "A child should love its parents."

"Oh, of course!" smiled Mrs. Brent. "But these modern ideas of surrounding a child with love and freedom to an extent where it becomes a little tyrant—well! I just can't see that! Of course I don't mean Joachim," she added quickly, sweetly. "He's a *dear* child, really . . ."

"He's got to be given everything he wants," murmured Mrs. Purney in a strange tone. It was fierce and it was by rote. "He's got to be kept happy."

"You must love him very much," snapped Mrs. Brent viciously, suddenly determined to get some reaction out of this weak, indulgent creature. She got it.

"I hate him," said Mrs. Purney.

Her eyes were closed again, and now she almost smiled, as if the release of those words had been a yearned-for thing. Then she sat abruptly erect, her pale eyes round, and she grasped her lower lip and pulled it absurdly down and to the side.

"I didn't mean that," she gasped. She flung herself down before Mrs. Brent, and gabbled, "I didn't mean it! Don't tell him! He'll do things to us. He'll loosen the house-beams when we're sleeping. He'll turn the breakfast to snakes and frogs, and make that big toothy mouth again out of the oven door. Don't tell him! Don't tell him!"

Mrs. Brent, profoundly shocked, and not comprehending a word of this, instinctively put out her arms and gathered the other woman close.

"I can do lots of things," Jokey said. "I can do anything."

"Gee," breathed Precious, looking at the china pig. "What are you going to do with it now?"

"I dunno. I'll let it be a pig again, I guess."

"Can you change it back into a pig?"

"I don't hafta, stoopid. It'll be a pig by itself. Soon's I forget about it."

"Does that always happen?"

"No. If I busted that ol' china pig, it'd take longer, an' the pig would be all busted up when it

changed back. All guts and blood," he added, sniggering. "I done that with a calf once."

"Gee," said Precious, still wide-eyed. "When you grow up, you'll be able to do anything you want."

"Yeah." Jokey looked pleased. "But I can do anything I want now." He frowned. "I just sometimes don't know what to do next."

"You'll know when you grow up," she said confidently.

"Oh, sure. I'll live in a big house in town, and look out of the windows, and bust up people and change 'em to ducks and snakes and things. I'll make flies as big as chickenhawks, or maybe as big as horses, and put 'em in the schools. I'll knock down the big buildings an' squash people."

He picked up a green apple and hurled it accurately at the brown sow.

"Gosh, and you won't have to practice piano, or listen to any old teachers," said Precious, warming to the possibilities. "Why, you won't even have to—oh!"

"What'sa matter?"

"That beetle. I hate them."

"Thass just a stag beetle," said Jokey with superiority. "Lookit here. I'll show you something."

He took out a book of matches and struck one. He held the beetle down with a dirty forefinger, and put the flame to its head. Precious watched attentively until the creature stopped scrabbling.

"Those things scare me," she said when he stood up.

"You're a sissy."

"I am not."

"Yes you are. All girls are sissies."

"You're dirty and you're a stinker," said Precious.

HE promptly went to the pigpen and, from beside the trough, scooped up a heavy handful of filth. From his crouch, Jokey hurled it at her with a wide overhand sweep, so that it splattered her from the shoulder down, across the front of her dress, with a great wet gob for the toe of her left shiny shoe.

"Now who's dirty? Now who stinks?" he sang.

Precious lifted her skirt and looked at it in horror and loathing. Her eyes filled with angry tears. Sobbing, she rushed at him. She slapped him with little-girl clumsiness, hand-over-shoulder fashion. She slapped him again.

"Hey! Who are you hitting?" he cried in amazement. He backed off and suddenly grinned. "I'll fix you," he said, and disappeared without another word.

Whimpering with fury and revulsion, Precious pulled a handful of grass and began wiping her shoe.

Something moved into her field of vision. She glanced at it, squealed, and moved back. It was an

enormous stag beetle, three times life-size, and it was scuttling toward her.

Another beetle—or the same one—met her at the corner.

With her hard black shiny shoes, she stepped on this one, so hard that the calf of her leg ached and tingled for the next half-hour.

THE men were back when she returned to the house. Mr. Brent had been surveying Mr. Purney's fence-lines. Jokey was not missed before they left. Mrs. Purney looked drawn and frightened, and seemed glad that Mrs. Brent was leaving before Jokey came in for his supper.

Precious said nothing when asked about the dirt on her dress, and, under the circumstances, Mrs. Brent thought better of questioning her too closely.

In the car, Mrs. Brent told her husband that she thought Jokey was driving Mrs. Purney crazy.

It was her turn to be driven very nearly mad, the next morning, when Jokey turned up. Most of him.

Surprising, really, how much beetle had stuck to the hard black shoe, and, when it was time, turned into what they found under their daughter's bed.

Theodore Sturgeon



The Dream Makers

By ROBERT BLOCH

They were living memories—

walking, living, breathing

memories—and that's

just what they intended to remain!



Illustrated by EMSh

I 'VE got the right lead for it. That's easy. I can start out with all the usual blah—Hollywood is a crazy town, filled with crazy people, and the craziest things happen there. I can rehash some of the weird and whacky and wonderful stories that have appeared in the news, and add a few which didn't appear, for obvious reasons. I can give this yarn the old buildup.

But there's only one trouble—it isn't a yarn and it happened to *me*.

So let's just start it slow and easy, with me climbing into my car that afternoon and heading out Wilshire Boulevard toward Restlawn. It was just another job and if *Filmdom* wanted me to do a series on "Grand Old-timers of

the Movies," I was their man. Their hungry man; let's add.

I headed out past the Miracle Mile and into Beverly Hills, taking it slow. I didn't particularly like this assignment.

Grand Old-Timers. That's what started me off. I knew what I was getting into — nosing around the Actor's Home and Central Casting, following leads that ended up in cheap flophouses and the gutters of Main Street.

That's where the grand old-timers were, most of them. The men and women who "grew up with the Industry" until the Industry outgrew them. Oh, Pickford, Goldwyn, Chaplin, deMille, Ford and a few others didn't have to worry. They'd survived or re-

tired gracefully on their savings. Valentino and Chaney and Fairbanks didn't have to worry, either, because they died at the height of their success.

But what about the ones who weren't lucky enough to die while they were famous—Griffith, and Langdon, and Barrymore, struggling along until the all-too-bitter end? And what about those who hadn't died yet—Sennett and Keaton and Gish and a dozen others? They'd be considered Grand Old-timers, too.

WITH a sigh, I turned off Wilshire past Westwood Village, seeking the smaller side-streets. I knew all about the Grand Old-timers. The "special awards" trotted out for them at Academy banquets, and the doors slammed in their faces the next day. The humiliating "bit roles" played in occasional way-back-when films; the overpublicized "comebacks" that puffed them up for one picture, then deflated them again to extra status.

It would be painful for them to be interviewed by me—and equally painful for me to do the job.

But a man must eat. And a man must dream . . .

They'd never be Grand Old-timers to me, because of the dreams: the dreams they'd manufactured for my wonder thirty

years ago. My dreams are still very much alive and so are their creators.

Right now, riding down into Santa Monica, I found myself back in one of the great dreams—the great nightmare.

It's a warm fall Wednesday night in Maywood, Illinois. The year is 1925 and tonight is its climactic moment, because you're eight years old and you're going to the Lido, all by yourself at night, just like a grownup. Sure, there's school tomorrow, but, gee, Ma, just this once, you promised, I won't be home too late, and I want to see it so bad.

You have eight blocks to walk, eight exciting blocks through autumn darkness, with the dime for the show in the right hand and the nickel for the candy bar in the left hand, and with every step, your heart pounds harder.

The Lido is a Palace. Its doors are guarded by marble columns a hundred feet high, but you don't just go right in. First you must look at all the pictures outside—the big ones in color and the little ones that are like photographs. There's this beautiful woman with the long hair and the man with the mask. And here the woman is standing on top of a tall building with another man in a soldier's uniform. Since he's got a trim little mustache, he must be the hero. Villains often wave mustaches, too,

but they're bigger and blacker and nastier ones.

There's the man with the mask, spying on them. You can't see his face. He's up on some big statue and he looks mad, even with the mask on. That must be him, all right. It must be.

But it's almost seven and the show is going to start, so you go up to that glittering cage and give your dime to the pretty girl with the lovely costume on. She smiles, and punches some machine, and out comes your ticket. Then you walk in and give your ticket to the man at the door. He smiles, too. You've already bought your candy bar at the store next to the show, so you're all set.

It's wonderful in the Lido. Even the lobby is wonderful. All red carpets and fancy chairs and a big bubbler with the water running all the time—not like at home where you have to turn the water off on account of the water bill being so high.

And it's even better inside, in the dark, because there must be a thousand seats to choose from, all plush and soft. When you sit down right spang in the center of the show and count the rows ahead and the rows behind, and look to see if any of the kids from school are there to see you sitting all alone like a grownup—why, then, you just naturally look up at the sky.

SURE, they've got a sky at the Lido, just as blue as outside at night, and it has stars in it! Honest, it has regular stars that twinkle! And all along the walls are statues, lighted up kind of dim, and the stars are shining, and it's more beautiful than any real place you've ever seen.

Then the light goes on up at the left side of the stage and it's the organ. A real pretty lady plays the organ. She has gold hair that sparkles or shines when the light hits it. But you don't look now; you listen.

You sort of skooch down in your seat, all soft and snug, and look at the blue sky and the stars, and let the music ooze over you. That organ must be just about the most wonderful kind of thing to play, and it plays everything. "Valencia" and "Blue Skies" and "Avalon" and that song, "Collegiate," that they played when Harold Lloyd was in *The Freshman*.

But now the light is going out, except for the little one right over the keys, and the music is changing to a sort of loud exciting noise, and the curtain is going back, just like magic, and the side lights blink off, and there is the movie.

First off, it's *Topics of the Day*, which is just a lot of grownup jokes one after the other, in too-small printing on the screen. The organ makes fiddle-around noises, but it isn't very interesting, not

like pictures. But then comes *Felix the Cat* and that little mouse is in it and the old farmer guy with the bald head and the beard. Funniest part is where Felix chases him through the haystack with the pitchfork and he falls in the well and comes up and spits out the water and a fish comes right out of his mouth.

But the real comedy is even better. It's got Billy Dooley in his sailor suit. Billy Dooley is one of the best, better than Bobby Vernon or Al St. John, but not quite as good as Lloyd Hamilton or Larry Semon or Lupino Lane. This one is real funny and everybody laughs. Billy Dooley, he jumps up in the air and sort of wigwags his feet three times before coming down again.

How do they do that?

Then the music pounds away and the comedy is over and they turn the lights blue for a minute. The big picture is coming—the one you've been waiting to see. You can tell by the lights and the kind of music that it's a real spooky picture.

There's this man in the mask and he wants to get the girl and he hangs this one guy in the cellar. Then he does get her and takes her down to his secret hiding place where he sleeps in a coffin and plays the organ. He's sitting there playing with his mask on, and the girl sneaks up behind

him, and you know what she's going to do now and you're tense and afraid.

All at once she does it—she pulls off the mask! And the face comes up to fill the screen, rushes out of the screen and blots out everything until there's nothing else in the world but that grinning flesh-covered skull with the rotting fangs and the glaring eyes that you're going to dream about tonight and every night.

And that's a dream you got from Lon Chaney.

OH, they made real dreams in those days. There's never been a monster since to equal Chaney, never a villain as arrogant as Stroheim, never a heroine as lovely as Barbara La Marr or a hero as rugged and determined as William S. Hart, who would go out alone in the hills to make his plans.

All of it came back from a million years ago, and then it was gone and I was riding down Caprice Drive and the sun was shining.

The sun shone on the Restlawn sign. I parked, walked up the drive, poked the buzzer. Chimes sounded.

The woman who opened the door wore a starched uniform. Her hair was starched and her eyes were starched, too. Stiff sanatorium face, stiff sanatorium voice.

"I beg your pardon. I'm from

Filmdom magazine. To see Mr. Franklin."

"Have you an appointment?"

"I called this morning."

"Room 216. That's on the second floor, front."

I took the stairs. I walked slowly, not relishing this, dreading what I might expect to find. A white-haired old man, sitting at the window of a private hospital room; sitting and staring out at the living in the streets and then staring back at the pictures of the dead lining his walls. *To Jeffrey Franklin, the world's greatest director.* Signed — Mickey Neilan, Mabel Normand, Lowell Sherman, John Gilbert.

Well, supposing they were dead, and supposing he was sick and old? He was still the world's greatest director. For my money and a lot of other people's money. Hadn't made a picture since that last floppola in '29, when sound really came in. But before that, he'd been one of the true dream makers.

Let's see, that was twenty-four, almost twenty-five years ago. Hard to imagine him still alive. Must be older than God. This was going to be sad, very sad. But a man must eat . . .

I knocked discreetly on the door of 216. The voice called "Come in." I opened the door and entered.

And the new dream began.

II

IN the publicity shots I'd seen of him a quarter-century ago, Jeffrey Franklin had appeared as a tall, black-haired man, smoking a curved-stem pipe. He was always pictured standing, legs apart, feet firmly planted, chin jutting forth aggressively.

Seeing Jeffrey Franklin in the doorway now was quite a shock.

He was a tall, black-haired man, smoking a curved-stem pipe. He stood with his legs apart, feet firmly planted, chin jutting forth aggressively.

I guess I stared.

"Come in and make yourself comfortable," he said in a deep, commanding voice.

It wasn't difficult to make myself comfortable, because 216 turned out to be a suite. There were at least two other rooms leading off the big parlor, and the parlor itself was more than spacious.

No hospital bed, no tattered clippings or faded photos on the walls, no institutionally uncomfortable furniture. Instead, I found myself in a modern, masculine decor that deserved to be called luxurious. The whole atmosphere was very definitely present-time. And so was Jeffrey Franklin.

"Get you a drink?" he asked.

"Here?" I said, surprised.

He smiled.

"I'm a paying guest, not a patient. A little alcohol tones the system, I find. Keeps a man from getting old."

"It certainly seems to work." I blurted it out tactlessly, but he smiled again.

"Type-casting would put you down for scotch and water. Right?"

"Right."

"Speaking of type-casting, what did you think of Frisbie?"

"Who?"

"Miss Frisbie. The dragon who guards the portals. Isn't she perfect for the role?"

I nodded. Even before he placed the drink in my hand, I felt at ease.

I chose a lounge chair and Jeffrey Franklin made a gracefully self-conscious picture on the sofa across from me. He looked a bit like those man-of-distinction ads they used to run a few years back, and (as my thoughts grew still more remote) like one of the old-time Shakespearean hams. Come to think of it, hadn't he started out a rep player in legit?

THE question reminded me of my errand, and abruptly I felt embarrassed once again. He sensed it immediately; his perception was remarkable for a man his age. (Good Lord, how old *was* he? He had to be close to seventy.)

"It isn't easy, is it?" His voice,

like his smile, had grown soft.

"What isn't easy?"

"Being a ghoul." He raised his hand. "I don't mean it unkindly, son. I know you're just doing a job, getting your story. But I wish I had a nickel for every inquiring reporter who has come out here, spade in hand, to dig up the remains during the past twenty-odd years."

"You've been here that long?"

He nodded. "Right here. Ever since *Revolution*."

"Your last picture."

"My last picture. The flop." There was no discernible emotion in his voice.

"But why—"

"I like it here."

"But you're not sick, and if you'll permit me to say so, it doesn't look as if you're broke, either. And you could have had other pictures. There were contracts waiting for you and—"

"I like it here." He leaned forward. "I'm afraid I can't give you much of a sob-story. And neither can Walter Harland, or Peggy Dorr, or Danny Keene, or any of the other regulars in my old company. None of us were forced out; none of us are on relief. You'll have a hard time squeezing the tears for this scene."

It was my turn to lean forward. "Mr. Franklin, I'd like to set you straight on one thing. I'm not looking for a sob-story. I wouldn't

write it if I found it. Believe me, nothing pleases me more than to know you're here by choice. I don't like anything to happen to my dreams."

"Your dreams?" He dropped the man-of-distinction pose. The long hands joined across his knees, and I noted with vague satisfaction that the backs were free of the mottled markings of age. "What do you mean by dreams?" he asked.

So I told him, or tried to tell him. About Chaney in *The Phantom of the Opera*. The dream about Keaton in *The General*. Doug sliding down the drape in *Robin Hood*, Charlie eating the shoe, Renee Adoree stumbling after the truck in *The Big Parade*—a hundred memorable moments that somehow stick in my mind with a greater sense of reality than most contemporary events of my childhood.

I guess I talked a long while. About the films, and the actors, and the directors of the silent days. About the effect of the organ music, the autohypnosis which was rudely shattered by the theatrical phoniness of sound. I wondered out loud whether or not I was alone in my experience or viewpoint; how many hundreds or thousands or millions of others (trending along toward middle age, now, and it's hard to realize that) might share the illusions of the

great days when the "silver screen" was really silver and shimmered with a strange enchantment.

I tried to figure why it had changed. Was it that I was no longer a child, had grown up? No, because I've seen some of the films again, since then, at special showings—*Caligari*, of course, *Zorro*, *Intolerance*, a dozen others. And the last reels of *The Strong Man* are just as funny, the scene in *The Thief* where Doug conjures up the army from the dust is still pure enchantment.

Well, was it radio, or television, or the smart-aleck "inside stuff" attitude adopted generally in a world where everybody was busy dispensing the "lowdown" on celebrities?

Was it the war, the postwar era, the new age of fear? Had the Bomb done more than split the atom? Had it also shattered the dreams?

"Such stuff as dreams are made of." Yes, Franklin was an old repertory ham, all right. He rolled out the quotation with sonorous relish, but I sensed the sincerity behind it.

"Odd that you've speculated along those lines," he mused. "I didn't think anyone else but ourselves had noticed the change." He noted my look. "Walter Harland and Tom Humphrey and some of the others still get to-

gether and reminisce. You'll probably be talking to them, if you're planning a series of articles. They've aged pretty gracefully, you'll find."

I took the opening. "I hope you won't be offended if I report the same thing about you," I said. "Frankly, I can't get over seeing you like this. I admit I expected—"

"This?" Jeffrey Franklin rose and abruptly seemed to shrink. In his place was a bent, hobbling oldster with withered, clawlike fingers scrabbling at a wobbly chin. Once again I remembered that he'd been an actor—remembered, too, that one of his tricks as a director was to play every role for the benefit of his actors before doing a take.

He straightened up, resumed his seat. "The years have been kind. Everything has gone well since *Revolution*. That was my only mistake, thinking I could go against their wishes. I haven't tried to change the plot since, and neither has Walter or Tom or Peggy, or any of the others."

My ears stood up, my forepaw raised, my tail straightened out, or would have if I had one. I smelled *story* here.

"Plot?" I said. "Then there is something to all those rumors—they did try to force you out when sound came and the studio reorganized. I suppose they threatened the company with the blacklist

and pushed you out with a stock reshuffle?"

Jeffrey Franklin looked up at the ceiling for a moment before he answered. Once a ham, always a ham.

But his answer, when he gave it, was casual. "Sorry to disappoint you once again. I told you we weren't forced out, and that's the truth. Check with the others. They all had offers, plenty of offers. Most of them had legitimate stage experience and they could have switched to the talkies without any trouble. But we decided it was time to quit while we were ahead of the game. As I say, *Revolution* flopped. And there were other examples: people who didn't have sense to quit when they should."

"You mean Gilbert and Lew Cody and Charles Ray, people like that?"

"Perhaps. But I was thinking specifically of Roland Blade, Fay Terris, Matty Ryan."

FUNNY how the names took on long-forgotten meanings to me.

Roland Blade, whose name belonged up there with Novarro and LaRoque and Ricardo Cortez—yes, he'd done a talkie or two, and then he went over the cliff in his fancy car. Fay Terris was vintage stuff, a sort of American Pola Negri. Come to think of it, she'd made a few sound films before the fire in her beach-house. Ryan

I didn't recall very well. He'd been an independent producer and a rather big one; something like Thomas Ince. Let's see, whatever happened to him? Suddenly I remembered the headlines. He'd been one of the early aviation enthusiasts, like Mary Astor's first husband. He crashed, and they found his body cut almost in two—

Odd. Very odd. They all met violent deaths. And now I could recall a half-dozen more, all around that time. Some were mysterious suicides. One had been the victim of a still unsolved murder. Others perished in freak fires, drowned, disappeared.

"Do you mean you were superstitious about going along with the new era and making talking pictures?" I asked.

Franklin smiled. "Once a reporter, always a reporter," he said. "Putting words in peoples' mouths. Please don't quote me to that effect, because I don't mean any such thing at all."

He paused, and once again his eyes sought the ceiling before he continued.

"If anything, I mean that we were all at the same point when the change came to Hollywood. We'd all started around the turn of the 'twenties, made our names together, did our best work and reaped the rewards at the same time. The best times were past, for most of the silent stars, direc-

tors, producers. All that remained was the struggle to stay on top, the resultant strain, the recklessness which would inevitably invade our personal life-patterns and which resulted in tragedy for those who chose to stay on. They used to call it 'going Hollywood.' You remember the stories of Lloyd Hamilton's fancy parties, and Tom Mix with his sixteen-thousand-dollar car, and the things that happened to people like poor Wally Reid, Arbuckle, and the rest of the crowd.

"No, we just decided to quit, that's all. I'm afraid it's not a very sensational lead for you."

I made one last try. "Didn't you say something about 'going against their wishes' and something about a 'plot'?"

Jeffrey Franklin rose. "You misunderstood me," he said. "I was speaking of our wishes, as a group, to leave films. And I've already told you there was no conspiracy. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm rather tired. But I've enjoyed this interview very much."

He was lying and I knew it.

But there was nothing else to do except shake hands and head for the door.

III

I WALKED into the little bookstore, still wondering if I had the right address. Nobody was out

front, and only a single bulb burned over the table at the rear of the shop. A stocky, middle-aged, bespectacled man dropped his book on the table and looked up at me.

"Yes?"

"I'm looking for Walter Harland."

The man stood up. He was taller than I'd thought and not nearly as old as he seemed at first glance. He took off his glasses and smiled. And there, of course, stood Walter Harland.

There was something quite dramatic in the very simplicity of the revelation. And something else, something vaguely frightening. He was too young. Franklin was also too young. They looked the way they had back in '29 or '30.

I wrestled the thought, two falls out of three, while I introduced myself, explained my errand, and alluded to my visit with Jeffrey Franklin.

Walter Harland nodded. "I expected you," he said. "Mr. Franklin w— told me that you might visit me."

"It was kind of Mr. Franklin to w— tell you," I answered.

He got it, and lowered his eyes.

"Don't say anything," I went on.

"I can understand. This sort of thing isn't exactly my idea of good taste, either."

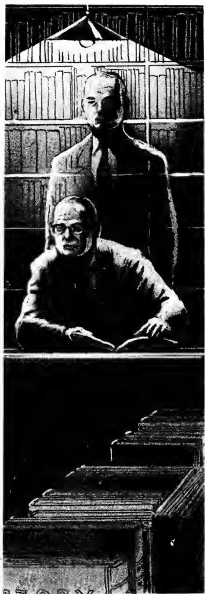
That got a smile out of him and an invitation to sit down. I

went through the same routine with him as I had with Franklin and got virtually the same answers. I began to wonder if Franklin hadn't given them all mimeographed copies of a script to memorize.

Yes, he'd had other offers when Franklin's production unit disbanded. No, he hadn't wanted to continue. Yes, he had plenty of money to live on; he'd bought this bookstore and was quite content. He had discovered it was much more pleasant to read other people's plots than to act them out.

I had to make the effort, then. "What's all this about plots?" I asked. "There's a rumor going





around that you're the victim of some kind of plot to force you into obscurity."

It would be appropriately dramatic, at this moment, to report that Walter Harland gasped and turned pale. But actually he merely choked on his cigarette smoke—and if he had any dermatological reaction at all, the light was much too dim to disclose it.

"Don't believe everything you hear," he said, when his brief choking spell was over. "This isn't a B-movie, you know. I assure you, we talked it over sensibly and we agreed it was time to quit."

"Because you were all at the height of your fame, and you had reaped the rewards and didn't want to go downhill," I finished for him. "Is that it?"

"Precisely." He was happy now. We were back on the script again. I wished I could leave him there, but a man has to eat. So I gave him my friendliest smile and let him have it right between the eyes.

"I've heard that song before," I said, "and I don't buy it. Not a note rings true. You were good and everybody knows it. But you were a ham, like all the rest. You always played it big because you loved it that way. Signing autographs. Posing in those satin dressing gowns, with the initials on the lapels yet. Attending premieres in your Rolls, with the flappers kiss-

ing the tires. Dragging those wolfhounds into the Montmartre. That was your meat, wasn't it?"

HARLAND chuckled; a good, hearty actor's chuckle. "I suppose so. But a man gets older. He grows up."

"Actors never grow up in that sense of the word, and you know it! Nothing could make a matinee idol like you give up the glamor routine. Nothing except, perhaps, an awful scare of some kind. Come on now, what was it?"

I felt pretty proud of my D.A. routine, because it seemed to work. He sat there, breathing heavily for a long while.

"All right," he said softly then. "There was a scare. An awful scare. Remember the films I played in? The fencing sequences, the fights, the acrobatics — Fairbanks stuff? That's what I was identified with. One day I went to the doctor for a routine check-up. He got excited, took cardiograms. You know the answer. My ticker was going bad. He warned me to take things easy if I wanted to be around for encores."

For a moment, I was a little ashamed of myself. Then that word "warned" cropped up again. And I remembered that if I could play the D.A., Walter Harland could play the part of a man with a bad heart. And I realized that before he'd spoken, he'd looked

up at the ceiling.

Maybe there was a fly up there, buzzing around. But something else kept buzzing in my brain.

I didn't say a word. I just shook my head.

He was already on his feet, ready to finish the script that Jeffrey Franklin had so carefully prepared. He held out his hand, then hesitated.

"You really want to know, don't you?" he said. "Not just to get an article, but because it means something to you."

I nodded.

"I'm afraid there's no way of explaining." He led me to the door, paused, put his hand on my shoulder. "Do you enjoy reading?" he asked.

"Yes."

"So do I. I've had a lot of time for it these past twenty years and more. I was particularly impressed with the writings of a man named Charles Fort. You know his work? Good. Well, Fort had an idea about cycles and events. Almost Spenglerian. He once said that when it's *steam-engine* time, people suddenly begin to *steam-engine*. Nothing much can be done to hasten that time. But, on the other hand, nothing much can be done to retard it. Maybe we all did the right thing because we recognized it was the right time."

I was back out on the street, looking up at the sky. And Wal-

ter Harland was back in his shop, looking at the ceiling. Or was it the ceiling?

IV

LET'S save the rest for the kindergarten class. I found Peggy Dorr in Pasadena. Danny Keene had a boat at Balboa. Tom Humphrey—of all people!—operated a TV service repair shop not far from Farmer's Market.

And you know what else I found when I located them. Too-young faces, too-evasive answers, too-uniform a story. And that far-away look in their eyes.

It all added up to one big puzzle. Unfortunately, detective stories aren't my line. I was out after stories I couldn't get. The whole assignment was turning out to be one grand and glorious fiasco.

Where was the drama in it, the old heart-throb, the pathos, the violin-music in the background? Everything had stopped for them in 1930, and the whole story belonged in the era before then when they made—literally *made*—the movies.

And nobody cared about that any more.

Or did they?

Riding back from the visit with Tom Humphrey, the notion hit me.

By Louis B. Mayer and all the saints, here was a story!

Not a lousy article, or a series of articles. This was a movie!

Look at how they flocked to the Jolson pictures, the life of Will Rogers, and all these phony stage-biography films. What about using the same gimmick on the life of Jeffrey Franklin? The whole silent-picture story, in glorious Technicolor, Warner color, Cinecolor, who cares?

Sure, Twentieth did *Hollywood Cavalcade*, but that was more than a dozen years ago. Besides, I had the kicker. Call it coincidence, fate, or just a happy accident for the benefit of yours truly, I had something that would really sell such a film. No more working with imitators and fakes—with the aid of a little modern lighting and makeup, the film could actually be done with the original cast playing real-life roles!

Natural. Socko. Boffo. The whole *Variety* lexicon flashed through my mind, and then the plot started to take shape, and before I knew it, I was sitting at the typewriter banging out a movie treatment.

It was a good one. I didn't have to take my word for it. I had Cy Charney's word. I sat in his office and braved the blasts fired by two complete cigars as he read through it, then had the satisfaction of seeing one of the biggest agents on the Strip going crazy over my idea.

"I can sell this tomorrow," he said. "It's completely copasetic. Of course you're not a name, but the idea is big enough. I think I can start the bidding at—lemme see now—thirty-forty Gs. And maybe a writing assist for you on the real script. You free to take an assignment, boy?"

I damn near broke my neck nodding.

"Keep in touch," said Charney. "Now get outta here and let me use my fine Eyetalian hand on this deal."

I got out of there, but things were happening so fast, I couldn't quite believe my ears. Then again, I wasn't depending on my ears in this deal. I had Mr. Charney's fine Eyetalian hand.

AND what a fine hand it was, too! He called me exactly twenty-six hours later.

"All sewed," he said. "Freeman is crazy about it and Jack wants it, too. And I can get fifty from one of them if the other knows he's got competition. I'll have a contract in my office before the week is out. Can you line them up by that time?"

"Line who up?"

"The cast, boy! Old Franklin and Harland and the rest. I'm taking your say-so on this that they're still what you say they are instead of strictly for the glue-factory. Of course, they'll have to be tested

and all, but I'm selling the story that they're still full of p. and v. Right? Now I'm asting you to line 'em up. 'Course, if you want me to come with you and put on the old pressure—"

"No, that won't be necessary. Let me handle it."

"Tell 'em not to worry about figures." Charney said. "I'll represent 'em. They oughta know what that means in this town. And, say, be sure you wangle a release out of old Franklin. It isn't exackly his life-story, but it's close enough so maybe you gotta cut him in on the story price. You work it out with him, hah?"

"Yes," I said. "I'll work it out with him."

But as I hung up, I wondered. I sat back and glanced up at the ceiling. There was no answer up there—not for me.

But, then, I wasn't superstitious. Maybe that was the answer: actors were superstitious, actors were always "on," actors were always hams.

Hams! I had it.

First thing I did, I sent a copy of the treatment, marked *PERSONAL*, to everybody I'd interviewed. Sent it special delivery, with an accompanying confidential letter. Gave it the complete build-up, including what a wonderful opportunity this would be to re-create the real art of the motion picture as it existed in the old

days. I also hinted (and hoped I could actually make good on it, too) that a portion of the film's profits might be donated to the welfare funds for the benefit of less fortunate old-timers. And in each letter I stressed what a tremendous part was waiting for the recipient.

I gave the deal just twenty-four hours to get rolling. Then I went around to Walter Harland's bookshop.

The first thing I noticed as I came in was that he didn't wear his glasses any more. And he had on a suit that had nothing in it to attract or impress the bibliophile. He'd sharpened up, which was fine.

"Well?" I said.

"Congratulations. It's tremendous. I had no idea what was in back of all this. Your cagy interview approach fooled me completely."

He not only offered, he ushered me, to a chair. And he pushed a package of Players my way.

"Did me good to read it," he said. "I feel twenty years younger."

"You look it," I told him, truthfully. "And that's what a new generation of movie fans are going to say when they see you on the screen."

HE beamed. "Danny and Tom called me last night. And Lucas—remember him? Used to do

the heavies, with the long cigarette holder, the sideburns and all? They're so excited—"

Something small stumbled into the bookshop; something old and withered and trembling like autumn's last leaf. It had a piping whiskey tenor, and it bleated, "Wait, I dowanna in'errupt you, but I just gotta talk t'you a minute."

"Sure, Tiny." Harland got up, walked over to the counter. The little man bleated in his ear for a moment. Harland went to the cash-register, rang up a NO SALE, and palmed something in the rummy's hand. "Now, if you'll excuse me—"

"Yeah, Walt. Yeah. God bless you." And autumn's last leaf blew away.

"Sorry." Harland came up to me, smiling.

"You don't have to be sorry," I said.

"Yes, I do."

"Meaning?"

"I can't do it. We can't do it. Your picture."

"But—"

"Spare me the sales talk. You know I'm dying to do it. So are the others. I wouldn't fool you. Why, it would be like starting life all over again. What I wouldn't give to see my name up there, show all these young punks how a real actor can project!"

"Then why—"

He was onstage and it was his scene all the way. "Because I told you we agreed to quit, all of us. And we did. There were one or two exceptions, but they aren't around any more. You didn't know it, but you just caught a glimpse of somebody who tried the other way. He only did one job for Franklin, and it was a minor comedy role, so I guess he got off easy in consequence. But it's no go. We couldn't take the risk."

"What risk?" I argued. "It's bound to be a smash. You can't lose a thing, and look what you stand to gain."

He shook his head. "Remember what I said about steam-engine time? We're horse-and-buggy people and we've got to stay where we belong." He smiled, because he was doing *Pagliacci* now. "Besides, here's one thing you can bet on—there's no picture without the old man and he'll never go for it. Never."

I shrugged myself out of the store, fast. I had a reason. I was looking for the last leaf. I knew him now—Tiny Collins. Never a big-name comic, but an old reliable, on a par with Heinie Mann, Billy Bevan, Jack Duffy.

One look at him, and at the little act he'd put on with Harland in the store, and I could figure out where to find him.

It was just four doors down the street.

COLLINS was up there at the end of the bar, all alone with a small shot and a large beer for company. He'd stopped trembling, now that he was back home again.

I uttered the magic formula. "Aren't you Tiny Collins? I'll buy."

It just so happens that I was able to dredge up the names of several of his pictures. Just so happens that I was able to dredge up several more shots and beers. Just so happens that I got him into the back booth and steered the conversational boat into my particular idea of a snug harbor.

Tiny was funny: Drinking sobered him up. He stopped slurring his sentences and became thoughtful. I didn't mention the picture at all, but I did set the scene for him. I hinted that I might do an article on him, and that was enough. We were pals. And you can ask a pal anything, can't you?

"Level with me, now," I said. "What's got into all your old friends? Why are they so publicity-shy and why did they quit?"

"You're asking me? Question I been asking myself for twenny years—why they quit. Different with me. I got the old axe. But they didn't have to quit. Seems like they all got together at once and decided."

"I know, Tiny. And I was wondering why. It just doesn't make sense."

"Nothin' makes sense," he agreed. "They wanna quit, so they get offers. I dowanna quit and right—like *that*—I can't get a job. Me, Tiny Collins, that's played with Turpin and Fields and whatzisname and—"

"I know, Tiny. I know. Here, let's have another." We did, and I waited for the gulping to subside before I continued. "But surely you have a theory."

"'Course I have a theory. Lotsa theories. First one is, they're all dead."

"Dead?"

"Sure. They got together and formed one of those—whatcha call 'em—suicide pacts. When they heard about Blade and Terris and Ryan and Todd and all the others bumping at the same time, they figured they hadda go, too. So they made a agreement and killed themself."

He meant to laugh, but midway it turned into a cough. I rode that one out, too.

"Only they're not dead, Tiny," I said.

"What? Oh, sure. They're not dead. Only they look like they're dead. Didn't you notice? Now take me, frinstance. I'm same age as Tom Humphrey. But look at the diffrence. I'm all beat up and him—he looks just like he did in *The Black Tiger*. That was his last one, for First National 'r somebody. And all of them are alike.

They look like they stopped when they stopped making pictures. Like they died and somebody stuffed 'em and wound 'em up."

I considered the theory a moment. I also considered that Tiny's shot-and-a-beer routine might have something to do with the difference in appearances.

"You have any other theories?" I asked.

Tiny looked at me. That is, he made a good effort. But he was weaving again.

"Yes. Yes, I got a theory. You won't tell anybody?"

"Honor bright."

"Good enough. Because—well, I know it sounds screwy, but I think they got scared." He groped for the beer-glass.

"Scared," I prompted.

"Good and scared. The old man, Franklin, he done it. He filled 'em full of the old juice. I heard stories. I ain't the one to confirm or deny. Confirm or deny." He liked the phrase.

"What stories?"

"The old man. He went off his trolley. After *Revolution*. The talkies comin' in and everybody croakin'. He got scared bad it might happen to him. And he was like God to the others. What he said —says—goes. He says quit, they quit. Also, you know how screwy they can get out here. Way I personally dope it out, maybe the old

man he got roped into one of those phony cults. You heard about phony cults?"

I assured him I had heard about phony cults.

"Suppose they got to him and sold him a billa goods on one of them religions-like? And the high potentate or whoever said it's not in the cards for you to make pictures no more. It's just not in the stars—"

Something clicked. *Stars. The ceiling.*

"Thanks, Tiny." I rose.

"Hey, where you goin'?"

"I've got a date."

"But I was just gettin' ready to buy a round—"

"Some other time. Thanks. Thanks very much." And I meant it.

After I got out of there, I headed for home. I drove slowly, because I had a lot to think about. Tiny made sense to me; the others didn't.

Pieces began to form and fit together. I remembered a lot I'd forgotten about Jeffrey Franklin. His acknowledged superstitions. The way he'd hold up a scene for days until he got exactly the right actor for a walk-through bit. The way he'd junk whole sequences, just like Stroheim, because something didn't look right. The way he handled his actors; never cursing them, but praying for them instead. *Praying* for them. And (I

remembered now) he had this trick of looking up in the air as if seeking divine guidance.

Now just suppose he had been sneaking off to astrologers—Lord knows, plenty of them did in the old days and were still doing it to-day—and one of them gave him the word that Gemini was in Uranus or wherever. And he stopped, just like that.

Could be. And could be, I might find out who his personal stargazer was and make a little deal. Or switch him onto another astrological or half-astrological quack. It was a cinch I had to do something.

I got home, let myself in, and prepared to go to work. The astrologers had listings in the phone book. I'd call every single one if necessary and—

It wasn't necessary. My phone rang, instead. And the voice said:

"This is Jeffrey Franklin. I received your communication and I was wondering when I could see you."

"Why, tonight if you like, Mr. Franklin."

"Good. We have a lot to talk about. I'm going to do your picture."

V

WE sat in the suite, drinking scotch. The sun went down in the Pacific, courtesy M-G-M,

and then Universal put the moon up in Technicolor.

Franklin did the talking. "So you see, it wasn't your story idea that convinced me, although I admit I was tempted. But when he called me up—the head of the studio, mind you!—and said his own car was on the way . . ."

I nodded, suddenly realizing that I'd underestimated Mr. Charney's fine Eyetalian hand.

" . . . and you can't imagine how it felt, just being back on a lot once more! Of course, many things are different, but I'm quite sure I have a grasp of technique. I've kept up on all the technical data—would you believe it, I still read every issue of *The American Cinematographer*—and I see everything that's released. And he has faith in me. He knows what it means to have me back in the Industry, actually directing—"

"Directing?"

"Certainly!" Franklin's smile outshone the moon. "That's the biggest surprise of all. I'm to direct as well as act in my own story."

What a fine Eyetalian hand!

There was no mistaking what this meant to Franklin. He was drunk on his own adrenalin.

"I never realized they still remembered me," he said. "Of course, there was this Academy dinner thing, a few years ago, but I thought that was merely a gesture. And then, today, sitting there

in the Executive Office, with everybody on the lot—I mean just that, everybody of any importance—literally begging to get in and meet me! You can't begin to realize what it means, son. You get used to the idea that it's all over, you even think of yourself as a has-been."

He sighed. "But I'm ready now. For the first time in years, I'm being honest with myself when I say that I've always been ready. And I think, working together, all of us, that we can come up with a few tricks that will surprise the Industry."

Intoxication is contagious. I began to get a little high myself now. Fifty thousand less ten per cent is forty-five thousand, knock off half for taxes and it's still over twenty thousand clear, plus an assist on the screenplay—Franklin would go to bat for me on that, I knew—and I'd be working on an A-budget special, and who knows where it might lead to?

Three cheers for the Grand Old-timers! Yes, and three cheers for—

The phone rang. Jeffrey Franklin walked over and picked it up in that very special way, the graceful actor's way. And his inflection, his modulation, was impeccable.

"Yes, this is Jeffrey Franklin speaking."

I watched him do the scene, noted the sudden faltering, the sag.

"No! Not really . . . terrible! . . . When? . . . Of course, certainly, anything you think he needs . . . Friday afternoon? Yes . . . Where will it be? . . . Yes. Tomorrow . . . Thanks."

THE phone clicked. Franklin sat down. For a moment, he almost looked his age.

"Bad news," he said. "An old friend of mine was killed early this evening. He was run over by a truck. The funeral will be Friday afternoon, and naturally I'll attend. Our studio conference must be delayed until Monday." He shook his head. "It's hard to see them go, one by one. You'll understand that, son, when you're my age."

"I'm sorry," I said. "Was it anyone I know?"

"I don't think so. Just somebody from the old days. He once did a bit in one of my productions. Tiny Collins."

This was my cue. I took it and kept my mouth shut. I kept it shut after I left Franklin, kept it shut all the next day. Of course there was a meeting with the gleeful Mr. Charney, during which he paced the floor and waved both of his fine Eyetalian hands in ecstasy over our good fortune. But I kept away from Harland and the others. They mustn't know that I'd talked to Tiny Collins.

They mustn't know what I was

beginning to suspect—because I didn't want to admit it, even to myself.

But Friday afternoon was the time set for the funeral, and I was there. And so was Danny Keene and Peggy Dorr and Tom Humphrey and Walter Harland and four other people whose names I never did learn. The local press and the *Reporter* had inserted routine squibs; but Tiny Collins, alive or dead, wasn't news. He wasn't even a Grand Old-timer, or the studios would have sent flowers, charged off to the public relations fund.

I sat with Jeffrey Franklin as the hired reverend went through the stock routine with the assistance of the hired undertaker and the hired pallbearers. It was a poor performance. Two of the four strangers present were fat old ladies and they cried the way fat old ladies always cry—loudly and unconvincingly. The cheap chapel set looked as though it might be struck right in the middle of the scene, and the lighting was inferior—the kind rented by a quickie unit on a *per diem* basis.

And that was the funeral given Tiny Collins, who had played with Turpin and with Fields and with whatzisname, who had literally sunk to the gutter and was now making his final comeback, playing his one big scene as the star of the show. Too bad it was such a

turkey. He wouldn't have approved.

The organist did routine things—why did that remind me so strongly of the old silents?—as we filed out. We had to finish the production at the cemetery.

IT didn't take long. The sky was overcast, and the approaching storm was so visible that even the Chamber of Commerce would have scuttled for cover. The reverend mumbled his lines, performed his inevitable gestures, and then they lowered the body.

It was a single take and they muffed it—let it down too fast. But nobody seemed to mind. Everyone started walking back to the path. The little group broke up, seeking their cars and eying the clouds whirling in from the west.

I stuck close to Jeffrey Franklin. Both of us had been pretty quiet throughout. He strode along the path, puffing on his pipe. As I followed, I realized he wasn't joining the group at the cars.

We walked over a little knoll into another part of the cemetery. There were more trees here and plenty of monuments. A turn in the path took us into the exclusive residential district—for every cemetery out here has its own miniature Beverly Hills.

He climbed another knoll. There was a stone bench on top: a stone bench facing an imposing monu-

ment which featured a D'Artagnan figure heroically poised atop a marble globe.

I looked twice at the figure, and recognition came to me before I read the name.

"Roland Blade!" I said.

"Yes." Jeffrey Franklin sat down on the stone bench facing the monument. He refilled his pipe as I joined him. The wind whistled through the treetops and I didn't like the tune.

This was the time to use the old psychology. I felt the need of a fine Eyetalian hand of my own—to grab Franklin by the scruff of his neck and raise his spirits. Not knowing exactly how to do it, or what to say, I blurted out what was on my mind.

"The funeral certainly wasn't much of a production, was it?"

He shrugged. "Why should it be? Tiny wasn't important enough to be worthy of a script. The whole scene was done off the cuff."

That was odd. He must have been thinking the same way I was—comparing the funeral to a motion picture. I remembered his comment on the *Restlawn* nurse and his references to "type-casting." Peculiar.

"Look, son," said Franklin, "I'd better talk to you."

"Go right ahead. It won't rain for a while."

"Depends on the script."

"What script?"



Franklin emptied his pipe. "That's what I'm going to tell you. It isn't easy, but now that we're going ahead with the movie, chances are that you won't like it. I don't."

I steadied myself. *Here it comes, boy. Here's your astrology or whatever it is, and you'd better not argue or laugh in his face.*

"Omar Khayyam must have known when he wrote those lines about a chess game. In Omar's time it might have been chess. Shakespeare put it down when he said, 'All the world's a stage.' And perhaps it was a stage when he lived. For us, it's motion picture production. *Steam-engine time. Movie time.* And it amuses them

to write a script, cast it, produce and direct."

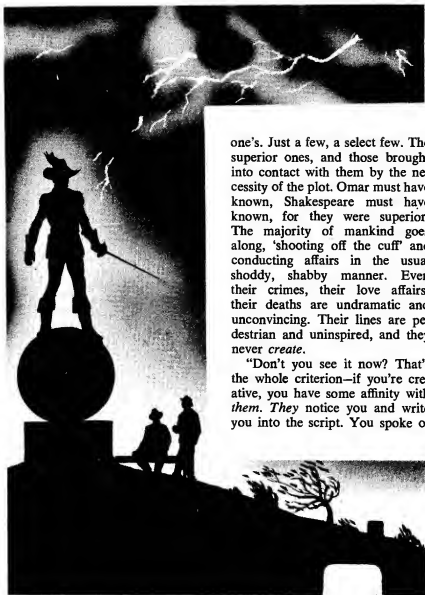
HE paused just long enough for me to say, "*Them?*"

"Them. They. It. One or many. Call the forces what you will—gods, demons, Fates, or cosmic intelligences. All I know is that *they* exist, have always existed, will always exist. And it amuses them to select certain mortals to enact roles in the little dramas they devise."

I forgot my good resolutions and burst out, "Are you trying to tell me that the whole world is being run as a movie plot, with some superhuman forces directing everyone's actions?"

He shook his head. "Not every-





one's. Just a few, a select few. The superior ones, and those brought into contact with them by the necessity of the plot. Omar must have known, Shakespeare must have known, for they were superior. The majority of mankind goes along, 'shooting off the cuff' and conducting affairs in the usual shoddy, shabby manner. Even their crimes, their love affairs, their deaths are undramatic and unconvincing. Their lines are pedestrian and uninspired, and they never *create*.

"Don't you see it now? That's the whole criterion—if you're creative, you have some affinity with *them*. *They* notice you and write you into the script. You spoke of

me and some of the others as being dream makers. We are. We were, rather, in the old days, because it was a part of the plot."

The wind was roaring in from the ocean, but it didn't bother me any longer. I had other things to worry about, now. Franklin was batty and—

"I wish I could get you to understand," he said. "Because it's really quite important, you know. Once you accept the fact, you'll learn how to adjust. You won't make the mistake of going against the Producer or the Director or the Writer. You won't run the risk of being edited out of the film. Because you're an actor now, like it or not, and you can't fight the script. If you do, the Director will catch you. And he'll have the Cutter slice your scenes. That's what happened to Blade and a lot of the others."

You can't reason with a loony, but I tried. "Mr. Franklin, you just aren't getting through to me. You sound more like Tiny Collins the other night, when he—"

It slipped out, just like that. *Was it supposed to? Was it in the script?*

"You knew Tiny Collins?"

"Well, I talked to him." And I told him what had happened. He listened, shaking his head. He glanced up at the sky, at the scudding clouds. Was he waiting for another cue before he spoke?

"Then perhaps Tiny's accident wasn't an—accident. He got back in the script again."

"I wish you wouldn't talk that way. This idea that all the important people in the world are part of some cosmic movie just doesn't make sense."

"What does make sense?" he shot back. "World wars, atom bombs, plagues, famines? Perhaps it isn't a movie for everyone, just for movie makers. Maybe *they* play War up there for generals and statesmen. And *others* might run a Business for executives. If you ever get to know any military leaders or high politicians or industrial tycoons, you might ask them. If it's true, they'll know. They'll find out when they try to drop the script and run their own show."

A PUNCTUATION of distant thunder stopped Franklin for a little while.

"Omar knew. He wrote what he was supposed to write—perhaps that's why *they* do it; *they* might feed on creative energy in some way we'll never comprehend—and then he stopped. Never wrote another line, but retired to obscurity. Because *they* tired of the scene and set a new one. *Rubaiyat* time was over. And Shakespeare stopped writing, too. Think about it for a while; think of the names, the big names, who flourished for a given

period and then dropped out of the picture forever. They were still at the height of their powers, too."

I tried to use logic. "But think of all the others who have kept going," I said. "The thousands who didn't quit."

"Some of them weren't big enough to be directed," Franklin answered. "Some of them undoubtedly knew, but were defiant. Napoleon's script ended at Elba, but he fought the Producer and came back. Well, you don't make comebacks in this world. They end in disaster. *Napoleon time* was over. He knew it before he died on St. Helena."

The sky was dark. Franklin lit his pipe and a thousand tiny red eyes winked out in the wind.

"But I'm not talking theory, son. I'm talking reality. I'm talking myself, and my company, and a dozen others who must have learned the secret in the days when we made the silent dreams. The script was right for us to succeed then and our success was sudden and spectacular. That was *silent time*. But *talkie time* came, and there was a new script, calling for new players. We had our choice—get out or be cut out. The wise ones retired. The Cutter got the rest. Now do you see?"

I saw. "Maybe. But why are you telling me this?"

Franklin smiled. It was a ghost-smile in ghost-light, but I sensed

it. "Because in the last few days, I've found out that I'm more than an actor. I'm a man. And a man must lead his own life. I thought, at one time, that I could take my bow and sit in the audience for the rest of the show. And for more than twenty years, I did. Then you came along, with your script. Your script, not *theirs*. And I want to do it. I want to direct it. I'm a director, too."

"Good." And it was good, I thought. "We'll do the picture."

He patted my shoulder. "Of course we will, son. But it wouldn't be fair to go ahead without warning you. There are the Cutters to consider. If the Director spots us ad-libbing and raises his finger—"

So help me, the old ham lifted his own finger and pointed dramatically at the statue of Roland Blade. And the thunder came booming in, right on cue!

FOR a moment, he almost had me sold. I thought of Blade, of Fay Terris, Matty Ryan and all the others who defied the coming of sound, who died before their time, died in sudden and inexplicable violence. Died before their time? Cut off after their time.

I wondered if *they* were watching us now, listening in on the scene, appreciating the gestures. I wondered if *they* had just sent out a signal to turn on the rain-making machine.

The downpour came. I rose hastily from the bench and started off down the path. I looked back, expecting Jeffrey Franklin to join me.

"In a minute," he said. "I'm just thinking."

"Now, look," I called. "You promised."

Jeffrey Franklin straightened up. He stood there in the rain, legs apart, feet firmly planted, chin jutting forth aggressively.

"You have my word. I promised you, I promised myself, and I promise *them*. From now on, I direct and act my own life. I'll make the picture."

I was a hundred feet away, the night was dark, and the rain a deluge; but even so, I caught his face. The chin was tilting up now.

Jeffrey Franklin was staring at the sky again.

It was lightning, of course—a single sharp bolt that chopped down Jeffrey Franklin and the picture, my hopes, everything. As the papers said later, and as I desperately told myself over and over again, even as I ran toward the dismembered corpse, it was only a freak accident.

But I couldn't hide from myself, as I ran, the final revelation or realization. Oh, it was a lightning bolt, all right—but to me, in the single instant that I saw it, it was more like the blade of a gigantic scissors.

Robert Bloch

Publishing the works of Voltaire seems to be a guaranteed way to invite catastrophe. Beaumarchais, author of *The Barber of Seville*, was the first; he lost a million francs and died poor in 1799. Dessert put out the second edition in ten volumes and died soon after; Migeon, who financed this edition, died in illness and poverty. Cérioux and the widow of Perroneau brought out a 60-volume edition and went bankrupt. Dolibon published a de-luxe set and died a laborer. Touquet died in 1831 before his edition was off the press; Gornery, his partner, completed publication in 75 volumes and was ruined. Deterville went blind as soon as his edition was published. Doubree alone seemed immune when he brought out his collection of Voltaire—until he accused a woman of stealing a book worth ten sous and she murdered him. René went broke immediately after his edition went on sale and was a common laborer when he died.

Voltaire did better than his publishers—he was a wealthy man when he died in 1788.



A little pile

By M. C. PEASE

There wasn't much of it,

but you could use it to build things . . .

and build . . .

and build . . .

I'M hiding out. Not from the law—at least not yet. From my friends and neighbors. I got a shack, here in the hills. I built it maybe ten years ago to

keep supplies in, and for a place to sleep when I'm out looking at—or for—my cattle. I haven't used it much the last few years, but now it's a good place to hide out.

Illustrated by FREAS

The whole thing started about five years ago. It's ended now, I guess. I'd sure like another crack at it. But I wouldn't bet much money that a second chance would do much good. It was my own damfoolishness that finished it, and the chances are I'm still a fool. Or leastwise I haven't got the self-control that's needed. Who does, except a moron? But still and all, I'd like to try.

It started, like I say, about five years ago. I was riding the hills that day. Just why I forget, but it don't matter. Except I wasn't in a hurry. Just being alone with my horse's ears and the hills.

So we ambled over a ridge, my horse and I. Out of habit, I looked to see what was in the valley we were coming to. Mostly it was just like any other valley, only maybe prettier than some. But up near the head there was something I couldn't quite figure. But who finds lumber piled out in these lonely hills?

SO I rode over. I wasn't in a hurry to get any place, and one way was about as good as another. When I got there, I was still surprised. It still looked like lumber. Only different. It was gray. It sparkled, somehow. In an odd sort of way I couldn't figure, that little pile of stuff was awful pretty.

I got off and looked at it close.

It wasn't wood. A kind of plastic, maybe. Or painted metal. It wasn't heavy. Nowheres near as heavy as wood. But it was hard. A knife point blunted on it. The ends were sort of funny, too. They were cut in a queer shape I couldn't reckon. They twisted in a way that looked as if they were meant to hitch on to something else. But in a way that wasn't clear.

It being chow time, more or less, I made camp there. After I ate, I lay down to rest a while with my hat lying on my face. And while I lay there I got to thinking.

First off, naturally, I thought about that little pile of stuff. Wondering where it came from, who brought it there, and why. I pictured it, studying it in all the detail I could recall. But it still didn't make sense, so finally I gave that up.

Then, as one thing led to another, the little pile of stuff that looked like lumber made me think of building a shack in the valley. It seemed a good idea, the valley was so pretty. Besides, I didn't have a shack anywheres close by. The more I thought of it, the better the idea seemed. I could see the shack, cozied in between the hills, sparkling in the sun with the dew on it, and maybe a couple of steers grazing along the slope behind it. I could see it so well, both in and out, that I could almost

have told you the length of each board.

So finally I pushed my hat back on my head and got up. I halfway expected to see the little shack all built, the plans I'd made had been so clear. It wasn't. But the little pile of stuff didn't look so little any more. In fact, it seemed almost big enough to build that shack with.

ON top of the pile, I noticed now, lay several big pieces. Just about the size for the bottom framing. So, just to play, I pulled them out, and laid them in a rectangle. It couldn't be anything but play, I thought, since even a shack needs nails.

But then I got the idea that maybe, if I lifted the end of one, and slid it down on the end of another, maybe the twisting shapes would fit together. I tried it. It didn't work. At first. But as I kept trying, it seemed clear they were supposed to fit, if only I could put them together right. I wondered how to do it. And then suddenly they went—don't ask me how. As I sit here and picture the thing, I still can't figure how. But they did slide in. And after that I never had to wonder how. They just did.

And so, in an idling sort of way, the shack got built. Exactly as I had pictured it. Exactly. Without a board—or whatever you want to call the pieces—being cut by so

much as a splinter.

When it was done, I stood and looked at it. Golly, it was pretty. It was sort of a stained color all over. A beautiful, rich brown that fitted the hills behind it as no other color could.

And that was funny too. Because, as I remembered the original little pile of stuff, it had looked like a litter of weatherbeaten boards. Gray. Not brown at all. In fact, alongside the shack lay a little pile of the stuff I hadn't used. And the pieces in that pile were still the weatherbeaten gray. Finally I shrugged. Figure it as I couldn't, the shack was brown and the little pile was gray. And both were awful pretty.

I spent the night there, since the day had gotten pretty well shot. The next morning I went on home. The little pile of gray stuff that was left over I took with me. It was very light, like I've said. A little awkward, maybe, balancing it on my saddle—but I didn't want to leave it behind.

I TOSSED the stuff behind a barn and went in the house. After supper, I was talking with my wife, telling her about my ride. My wife's a practical woman. She likes to hear about the cattle—how many, where, and in what shape. She likes to hear about the grass and figure how many pounds an acre of it will put on a steer.

And I like to talk about the cattle—but I talk about how they stand in the noonday sun, swishing their tails and chewing their cud. I like to talk about the grass and whether it makes the hills green or golden in the evening light.

So these reports I make don't always go so good. In fact, they usually end with her telling me she don't understand how I hang on to a nickel. Sometimes I wonder myself. And sometimes I wonder

why a man ought to, anyway.

In this case, I got to telling her about the shack—how pretty it looked—trying to tell her its exact shade. Maybe I should have talked about how useful it would be. Anyway, she seemed to get a mite put out. She started laying into me about a shed we needed by the house. I'd been thinking of that shed for near a year. Without ever actually doing anything about it. Hearing about how I'd built this shack in the hills in half a day



reminded her. And she reminded me.

So finally I drifted out to the barn. It was peaceful there. And because I wanted peace all around, I started figuring on the shed.

I knew where it ought to go, and how big it ought to be to hold what she wanted it to hold. What I was trying to figure was how to fit it to the house. So I thought about the house and saw in my mind what the shed ought to look like. Gradually the picture came clear

until I knew where every piece of wood should go.

And then I went to bed.

In the morning, I went cruising around the barn, looking to see what wood was there so I wouldn't buy more than the shed needed.

I came across the little pile of stuff I had built the shack from. The little pile I had brought in the day before, balanced in front of me on the horse.

Only the little pile of stuff wasn't little any more. To pack it around now would take at least a herd of horses. It was, in fact, a huge enormous pile.

Now this was mighty peculiar.

SO I sat down and figured. I recollected how I'd found the little pile, and how it had seemed too small for any use. Then I'd planned the shack. And when I'd opened my eyes, the pile was bigger. And from that pile I'd built the shack, exactly as I'd planned. And had a little pile left over.

And then, last night, I'd toted in the little pile that was left over. Then, sitting in the barn, I'd planned the shed. And now the pile was big enough to build the shed. And maybe leave a little pile left over.

I had no explanation. I don't have one now. No reason why or method how. But what was happening seemed clear enough. It looked like all I had to do was



picture in my mind whatever I wanted built, and then, when I'd look at what had been the little pile of stuff, it'd be big enough to build the thing I'd pictured. And leave a little pile besides.

And it was even more accommodating. Not only would the pile be big enough, but every piece in it would be just right. Every plank would fit just where I had pictured it.

And so I built the shed. Exactly as I'd pictured it.

My, it was pretty. It sparkled in the sun, a lovely soft red-brown. Just looking at it I got the sudden thought that now I'd have to paint the house again. But then I looked at both together. The shed was bright, its color sharp—but in some funny way it didn't make the house shabby. Maybe the house looked even better for it.

This stuff, I thought, had better color-sense than me. In picturing the shed, I had thought hard on the whole problem. Not only of the shed, but of the shed and house. Now the pile had taken the whole problem, too. I'd given it the answer to the shape. And it had given me the answer to the color.

That stuff was *most* accommodating.

The little pile of stuff that was left over I tossed behind the shed, and went to get my wife and show her the shed.

THE story from here on out to the end is clear and simple. First I built a wing onto the house. Then, after a while, I tore down the house and built a new one on the wing. I built a barn, and then another. I built a doll house for my daughter and a fort for my son.

I built a wagon and a cart. Although I tried I couldn't plan an auto. But still, after a couple of months, there wasn't much around our place that wasn't from that little pile of stuff.

I was happy, playing with the stuff and building things. But my wife's a business woman, and she began to get ideas. We tried them out. She thought up some plans. Simple ones. A shelf, I think, and other things. But when she went and looked all through the little pile of stuff, the pieces she wanted weren't there. They weren't there until she told *me* what she wanted to build. And then they showed up.

In fact, it all went still farther than that. If I planned a simple little box, say, the six pieces needed lay on top of the pile. I could take those pieces and slide them in together, making a good tight box. But she couldn't. And she couldn't take my box apart, though I could easily.

It seemed like the pile only obeyed me.

It got her a little mad, but in

another sense it was good. If nobody else could handle the stuff, that meant we had a corner on it. We could do things for our neighbors—at a price. Build barns and houses. And still we wouldn't actually be giving them the stuff—not like we had it. They still would have to come to me for any changes, or for more.

So we went into business. We would sell a man a barn, for instance. I would arrive with my little pile, and dump it in some inconspicuous but handy spot. Then I'd walk around with the guy and let him tell me exactly what he wanted and where. That night I'd plan it, picturing it in every detail in my mind. And the next day, build it.

A pleasant business. Not only profitable—and money's always welcome—but I could figure I was doing everybody good. I was building them better barns than the old wooden ones, and for less money, and the barns were prettier. I always liked a nice red barn that fitted what it was supposed to do, and these barns were that and more—they were just exactly like a barn ought to be.

They were practical, too. Never needed painting. Never wore out that I could see. Couldn't burn down or start sagging. Just about perfect.

The thing that wasn't perfect was me.

IT was two days ago I found out what was wrong with me. I'd been to town to pick up some supplies—flour, sugar, things like that. I was driving back over the hills with the wagon. The horse knew the road as well as I, and I wasn't arguing with him.

I was sitting on the seat watching the sunset. Mighty pretty, sitting like red gold atop the hills. I was just dreaming.

I looked down a valley and happened to see a barn I'd built for a neighbor. It set me to thinking. I recollected the original little pile of stuff. I saw it, in my mind, lying in the hills just as I'd first seen it. I thought of the shack. And the shed. My own barns and house. The wagon, the doll house, and the fort. I thought of all the barns and things I'd built for other people. I saw them all, spread out before me.

It was impressive. The total of things that had been built from that little pile of stuff was fantastic. Acres of board feet, all from a little pile I could have toted on a pack horse.

I thought about all the stuff, every bit of it, wondering how so much could have come from so little. It seemed to me the atoms must be stretching and straining, crying out at every bond.

I wondered what would maybe happen if those bonds got stretched too tight. I tried to picture it.

Would the stuff just split apart into dust far finer than the finest dust I knew?

The thing happened so sudden I didn't rightly even feel the jar. The next thing I realized I was sitting in the middle of the road. My horse was looking over his shoulder, wondering what was going on. Behind me on the road, my bags of flour and other things lay neatly stacked.

The wagon just wasn't there.

It took me a bit to figure it out. But the answer was simple.

The wagon had been made of stuff. And, imbecile that I am, I had been picturing stuff turning into dust. And so it had.

As that thought percolated, another entered with it. I stood up quick and looked to see my neighbor's barn.

In its place stood only a pile of hay. It, too, had turned to dust. And so had another barn, farther on.

AND so, I'm here—hiding in a little wooden shack in the hills. In coming here, I skirted around where my house had once been. Only a vast pile of furniture and clothes. My children and some chickens perched on top. And my wife standing there. Just standing, her hands on her hips.

I'm hiding and I'm working. Two chances I got, maybe. In my mental roll-call of the barns and everything else I'd built, maybe I forgot some little thing. Some chicken coop or children's toy. And if I did, maybe it didn't turn to dust.

Could be—but I doubt it.

And then there's the dust. Some of it must have come here on my clothes. I've thought about it, trying hard to picture it. I sit here with a watch. Every half hour, I do my best to wonder if each little grain might not be twice the size it was. Maybe some day I'll get a piece that's big enough to see.

It's going to take a long, long time, though. For the dust that I had pictured was the tiny separate atoms. And that means there's a world of size to grow.

But when I recollect how my wife looked, standing there among the furniture, and how my neighbors must feel about their disappearing barns, I figure this place here is not so bad. Not bad at all. The wind blows gently down the hills. Some cattle, just standing there so quiet. It's a mighty pretty place.

M. C. Pease

By JOHN WYNDHAM

How Do I Do?

*Very romantic: a girl falling in love
with her husband at first sight . . . but
after they've been married for years?*

Illustrated
by CAVAT



FRANCES paused to look into the showcase fastened to the wall between the pastry-cook's and the hairdresser's. It was not a novelty. Passing it a hundred times, she could not fail to be aware of it, and of the open door beside it, but until now it had never really impinged. There had

been no reason for it to impinge. Hers was a future that seemed, in its main outlines at least, and insofar as any woman's is, pretty well charted.

Nor did the carefully worded leaflets behind the glass refer to the future directly. They offered Character Delineation, Scientific

Palmistry, Psychological Prognosis, Semasiological Estimates, and other feats just beyond the scope of the Witchcraft Act or the practical interest of the police, but the idea of the future somehow showed through. And, for the first time, Frances found herself interested; for it is not every day that a girl sends her ring back and looks out upon a suddenly futureless world.

And yet, of course, and unlikely as it seemed at the moment, a future of *some* kind must lie ahead of her . . .

She read about Mastery of one's Fate, Development of one's Personality, Guidance of one's Potentialities, went through a number of testimonials from persons who had been greatly helped, valuably guided, spiritually strengthened, and generally rendered more capable of managing themselves by the sympathetic counsels of Señora Rosa.

It was the word "guidance" occurring several times that set up the most responsive echo. Frances did not exactly imagine that she could go to this perfect stranger and extract a plan for living a neatly readjusted life, but the world, since she had handed that small registered package across the post office counter, had become a place for which she had no plans of her own, and she felt that an improved acquaintance with her potentialities might be an aid.

She turned. She glanced along the street both ways, with the air of noticing and approving the freshness of the early-summer day. Then, having observed no one whom she knew, she edged into the doorway, and climbed the dusty stairs.

"MARRIAGE, of course," said Señora Rosa, with the slightest trace of a hiccup. "Marriage! That's what they all want to know about; it's all they *do* want to know about. Want to know what he looks like—'s if that mattered. Don't want to know if he'll beat 'em, or leave 'em, or murder 'em. Jus' what he looks like—so they'll know where to throw the lash—the lasso."

She took a drink from the glass beside her, and went on: "Same with babies. Not interested to know if they'll turn out to be gangsters or film shtarsh. Jus' want to know how many. No 'riginality. No 'magination. Jus' like a lot of sheep—'cept, of course, they want a ram each." She hiccuped discreetly again.

Frances started to get up. "I think, perhaps—" she began.

"No. Sit down," the Señora told her. While Frances hesitated, she repeated, not loudly but quite firmly: "*Sit down!*"

Against her inclinations, Frances sat down rather to the front of the chair.

She regarded the Señora across

the small table which held a crystal and a lamp, and knew that she had been a fool to come into the place at all.

With her swarthy skin, glittering dark eyes, and glaringly unnatural red hair, the Señora was difficult to visualize in the role of sympathetic counselor at the best of times. Slightly drunk, with the high comb which supported her torn mantilla listing to the right, an artificial rose sagging down over her left ear, and her heavy eyelids half-lowered against the trickle of her cigarette's smoke, she became more than displeasing. It was, in fact, absurd not to have turned back at the very first sight of her, but somehow Frances had lacked the resolution then, and had not been able to gain it since.

"Fair return. That's my rule, an' no one's going to say I break it," announced the Señora. "Fee in advance, an' fair return. Mind you, there's nothing against a bit more for special satisfaction given. But fair return you shall have."

SHE switched on a small, pink-shaded lamp close to the crystal, crossed the room a trifle uncertainly to draw the curtains, and returned to her chair.

"Cosier," she explained. "'S easier to concentrate, too."

She stubbed out her cigarette, drank off most of the remaining contents of her glass, gave her

comb a push towards the vertical, and prepared to get to work.

"'S on me today," she observed. "Some days it's *on* you; some days it's not—never can tell till you start. But I can feel it now. Tell you pretty near anything today, I could—I wouldn't, of course. Something special you'd be wanting to know, beyond husbands, babies, an' the usual?"

The low lighting worked quite a change in the Señora. It made the lines of her face more decisive, and modified the redness of her hair; it glinted fascinatingly on her long brass earrings swinging like bell clappers, and glistened even more brightly in her dark eyes.

"Er—no," said Frances. "As a matter of fact, I think I've changed my mind. So if you—"

"Nonsense," the Señora told her shortly. "You'll only be back in a day or two if you do, an' then it might not be *on* me the way it is today. We'll start on your future husband."

"No. I'd really rather not—"

"Nonsense," said the Señora, again. "They all want that. Jus' you keep quiet now. Got to concentrate."

She leaned forward, shading the crystal with one hand from the direct light while she gazed into it. Frances watched uncomfortably. For a time nothing happened, except that the earrings swung slowly to a stop. Then:

"H'm," said the Señora, with a suddenness that made Frances jump. "Nice-looking young feller, too."

Frances had a vague feeling that such pronouncements, whatever their worth, were usually made in a more impressive tone and form, but the Señora went on:

"Nice tie. Dark blue an' old gold, with a thin red stripe in the blue."

Frances sat suddenly still. The Señora leaned closer to the crystal.

"Couple of inches taller than you. 'Bout five foot ten. Smooth fair hair. Nice mouth. Good chin. Straight nose. Eyes sort of dark gray, with a touch of blue. Got a small, crescent-shaped scar over his left eyebrow, an old one. He—"

"Stop it!" Frances snapped.

The Señora looked up at her for a moment, and then back to the crystal.

"Now as to children—" she went on.

"Stop it, I tell you," Frances said again. "I don't know how you found out about him, but you're *wrong*. Yesterday I'd have believed you, but now you're quite *wrong*!" The recollection of putting the ring with its five winking diamonds into its nest of cotton and closing the box became unbearably vivid. She was exasperatingly aware of tears starting to well up.

"There's often jus' a bit of a

tiff—" began the Señora.

"How dare you! It's not just a tiff, at all. It's finished. I'm never going to see him again, so you can stop this farce now."

The Señora stared. "Farce!" she exclaimed, incredulously. "You call my work farce! Why you—I'd have you know—"

Frances was angry enough for tears to wait.

"*Farce!*" she repeated. "Farce, and cheating! I don't know how you find out about people, but this time it hasn't worked. Your information's out of date. You—you—you're just a drunken old cheat, taking advantage of people who are unhappy. That's what you are." She stood up to get herself out of the room before the tears came.

The Señora glared back at her. She snatched across the table and caught her wrist in a grip like a steel claw.

"Cheat!" she shouted. "Cheat! Why, you silly, ignorant little ninny! Sit down!"

"Let me go," Frances said. "You're hurting my wrist."

The Señora leaned closer. Her brows were lowered angrily over eyes that glinted more than ever. "*Sit down there!*" she ordered again.

FRANCES suddenly found herself more scared than angry. She stood for a moment, trying to

outstare the woman; then her eyes dropped. She sat down, partly because the grip on her wrist was urging her, but more from nervousness.

Señora Rosa sat down again, too, but she continued to hold Frances' wrist across the table.

"Cheat!" she muttered. "*You call me a cheat!*"

Frances avoided meeting her gaze, but: "Somebody must have told you about me and Edward," she said, stubbornly.

"*That* told me," said the Señora, pointing her free hand at the crystal. "That, an' nothing else. Tells me a lot, that does. But you don't believe it, do you? Think I'm a liar as well as a cheat, don't you?"

"I didn't really mean—"

"Don't give me that. 'Course you meant it. No respect. No respect' at all. Ninnies like you need lesson to teach 'em respect. Sh'll I tell you when you're goin' to die, an' how? Or when your Edward's goin' to die?"

"No—no, please," said Frances.

"Ha! Don't believe me—but you're afraid to know."

"I'm sorry. Really I am. I was upset. Please let me—" Frances began, but the Señora was not to be so easily mollified.

"Farce! Cheat!" she muttered. "*Ninny!*" she added forcibly, and fell silent.

The silence lengthened, but the grip on Frances' wrist did not

relax. Presently, curiosity drove her to a swift upward glance. She had a glimpse of a quite different expression on the Señora's face—more alarming in some indefinite way than her former anger. She appeared to have had some kind of inspiration. Her hand clutched Frances' wrist more tightly.

"*Show* you, that's what," she said, decisively. "Sick of ninnies. Jus' *show* you. Look in the crysh—crystal!"

Frances kept her eyes down. The hand on her wrist twisted painfully.

"*Look in the crystal!*" commanded the Señora.

UNWILLINGLY, Frances lifted her head a little and looked at it. It was a quite uninteresting lump of glass, showing a number of complicated and distorted reflections.

"This is silly," she said. "I can't see anything. You've no right to—"

"Be quiet! Jus' *look!*" snapped the Señora.

Frances went on looking, wondering at the same time how she was going to get herself out of this. Even if she could pull free, it was impossible in the small room for her to reach the door without coming within the Señora's grasp—and there'd be delay in getting the door open, too.

Then her thoughts broke off as

she noticed that the crystal was no longer clear. It seemed to have become fogged in some way, as though it had been breathed upon. But the foggy look grew thicker as she watched until it was like smoke wreathing inside it. Queer! It was some sort of trick of the old woman's, of course . . . Some kind of hypnotic effect which made it seem to grow bigger and bigger.

It appeared to widen out and out as she watched it, until there was nothing at all anywhere but convolving whorls of fog . . .

Then, like a flash, it was gone, and she was sitting in her chair, looking at the clear crystal.

The grip on her arm was gone, too; and so, when she looked up, was the Señora.

Frances snatched up her bag and made for the door. No sound came from the inner room as she tiptoed across. She opened the door carefully, closed it quietly behind her, and skipped swiftly away down the stairs.

A very unpleasant experience, Frances told herself, walking briskly away. In fact, being held there like that against her will was the sort of thing one ought to tell a policeman about; it was probably assault, or something quite serious, really . . . Still not quite certain whether she actually wanted to see a policeman or not, she emerged from her thoughts and looked about her.

In the very first glance she made a discovery which drove such frivolous subjects as policemen right out of her mind. It was that everyone else in sight who had decided that the time for cotton had arrived was clad in a frock very much shorter and very much narrower than her own. She stared at them, bewildered. She must have had an inconceivable preoccupation with her own affairs not to have realized that there had been such a radical change of style.

She paused for a moment in front of a shop window to observe the reflection of the blue and white striped cotton frock that she had thought good for another summer. It looked terrible, just as if she had been upholstered. Another glance from it to the other frocks made her go hot with embarrassment: they must all be thinking she had come out wrapped in a large bedspread.

There was clearly one thing to be done about that, and done at once.

She started to walk hurriedly in the direction of Weilberg's Modes.

WHEN Frances re-emerged into the street half an hour later, she felt considerably soothed. The congenial occupation of shopping, and the complete clearing of mental decks required for concentrating on the choice of a creation in an amusing pattern of palm trees

and pineapples—plus the relief with which she had seen her old frock borne off to be sent to her flat—had helped to put Señora Rosa into proper perspective. Considered calmly over an ice-cream soda, the affair dwindled quite a lot—and her own part in it came to seem curiously spineless.

Her intention of informing the police faded. If there were a charge, and she had to give evidence, she'd scarcely be able to help exhibiting herself first as a fool for having gone to the place at all, and then as a nitwit for staying when she did not want to. Moreover, it would very likely be reported in the papers, and she'd hate that—so would Edward . . .

Which brought her back to thinking of Edward and to wondering whether she had perhaps behaved like a silly little fool there, too. After all, he had known Mildred for years and years—and just two or three dances. People said one ought to be careful about not feeling *too possessive*. All the same, just a few days after he had become engaged . . . No, it didn't do to look cheap or easy, either. Really, life could be difficult.

Though Frances decided that she would walk home, she did not consciously choose the route. That is to say, she did not tell herself: "I'll go by St. James's Avenue, past that house that we decided would just suit us." It simply was that her feet

happened to carry her that way.

Coming nearer to the house, she walked more slowly. There was a moment when she almost decided to turn back and go by another way. But she could not go around forever, avoiding every reminder; a person had to get used to things sooner or later. She walked resolutely on.

Presently she was able to see the upper floor of the house, above the hedges. A comfortable, sensible-looking, friendly house, not new, but modern without being modernistic. It gave her a little knot high in her chest to see it again now. Then, as more of it came into view, the knot gave way to a feeling of dismay.

There were curtains in windows that had been blank. The hedges had been trimmed. The board which had announced 'For Sale' was gone.

SHE paused at the front gate. An astonishing amount had been done to the place in the few days since she had last seen it.

The flower beds in the front garden were bright with tulips, the fig tree against the side wall had been cut and tied back, the windows shone. The doors of the garage were open, with a comfortable-looking car standing on the concrete driveway in front. The lawn had been closely mown. On it, a little girl of four or so, in a

blue frock, was conducting a tea party with earnest admonitions to the guests, consisting of three sizes of teddybear and a golliwog.

Frances was filled with a sharp indignation. The house had been almost hers. She had practically decided that it was the one her father was going to give them for a wedding present—and now it had been snatched away without a word of warning. It wouldn't have been so bad if it hadn't somehow contrived already to look so aggressively *settled* . . . Not that it really mattered, of course, now that she had finished with Edward . . . All the same, there was a feeling of having been cheated in some way that she didn't quite understand.

The little girl on the lawn became aware of someone at the gate. She broke off from scolding the golliwog to look up. She dropped the miniature cup and saucer she was holding, and started to run toward Frances.

"Mummy!" she called.

Frances looked around behind her. There was no one there. Then she bent down instinctively as the small figure hurtled itself toward her. The little girl flung her arms around Frances' neck.

"Mummy," she said, with breathy intensity. "Mummy, you *must* come and tell Golly not to. He *will* talk with his mouth full."

"Er—" said Frances, out of the

sudden stranglehold. "I—er—you—I mean—"

The little girl relaxed the embrace, and tugged at her arm.

"Oh, *do* come along, Mummy," she said. "He's 'veloping bad habits."

DAZEDLY, Frances allowed herself to be led across the lawn to the tea party. The little girl improved the somewhat dissolute golliwog by propping him into a sitting position.

"There," she told him. "Now Mummy's here you'll have to behave. Tell him, Mummy." She looked at Frances expectantly.

"I—er—um—you—" Frances began, confusedly.

The child looked up at her, puzzled.

"What's the matter, Mummy?" she asked.

Frances stared back at her, recollecting photographs of herself at about the same age. A peculiar feeling started to come over her. The small, earnest face seemed to swim slightly as she looked at it. Its expression grew concerned.

"Aren't you feeling well?"

Frances pulled herself together.

"I'm—I'm all right—er—darling," she said, unsteadily.

"Then *do* tell Golly he mustn't. It's awf'ly rude."

Frances went down on her knees. She was glad to; the ground felt more solid that way. She leaned

toward the offending golliwog, who fell flat on his face and was hastily corrected by his mistress.

"Er—Golly," Frances told him. "Golly, I'm very shocked indeed to hear this about you. People who are invited to parties . . ."

So real! All of it!

Now that the lump in her chest which wasn't quite panic or scare, but a bit like both, had subsided, Frances found herself able to regard the situation a little more calmly. The classic certificate was to be obtained by pinching oneself. She had done that, sharply, but without changing any of it. She looked at her hand, flexed it; it was her own hand, all right. She plucked a little grass from the lawn; real beyond doubt. She listened to the sounds about her; they had an authentic quality difficult to deny. She picked up the nearest teddybear and examined it . . . no dream ever finished anything with that amount of detail.

She sat back on her heels, looking up at the house, noticing the striped chairs on the porch, the patterns of the curtains, the recent coat of paint . . . She had always thought that hallucinations must be vague, misty experiences, but all this had a solidity that was rather frightening.

"Mummy," said the little girl, turning away from her tea party, and standing up.

Frances' heart jumped slightly.

"Yes, dear?" she said.

"'Mportant business. Will you see that Golly behaves himself?"

"I—think he understands now, dear," Frances told her.

The small face in its frame of fair hair looked doubtful.

"P'raps. He's rather wicked, though. Back soon. 'Mportant."

Frances watched the blue frock as the child scampered away round the corner of the house on some mysterious errand. She felt suddenly forlorn. For some moments she remained on her knees, returning the shoe-button stare of the teddybear in her hands. Then the absurdity of the whole thing flooded over her. She dropped the bear and got to her feet. At just that point a man emerged from the front door of the house on to the porch . . .

He wasn't Edward.

He wasn't anybody she'd ever seen before in her life.

HE was tall, rather thin, but broad in the shoulders. His dark hair curled a little, and there were slight flecks of gray over his ears. He had been heading toward the car, but, at the sight of her, he stopped. His eyes crinkled at the corners and seemed to light up.

"Back so early!" he said. "New frock, too; and looking like a schoolgirl in it. How do you manage it?"

"Uh!" gasped Frances, caught in

a strong and entirely unexpected embrace.

"Look, darling," he continued, without loosening his hold. "I simply must tear off now and see old Fanshawe. I'll be back in less than an hour, though."

His hug brought the rest of Frances' breath out in another involuntary "Uh!" He kissed her soundly, slapped her behind affectionately, and dashed for the car. A moment later, it carried him out of sight.

Frances stood, getting her breath back, and staring after him. She found that she was shaking and filled with a most odd sensation of weakness, particularly in the knees. She staggered over to one of the chairs on the porch and subsided there. For a space, she sat motionless, her eyes set glazedly on nothing. Then, not quite accountably, she burst into tears.

With the decline of emotion to a sniff-and-dab, the unorthodoxy of Frances' situation began to trouble her. In whatever peculiar way it had come about, the fact remained that she had been "Mummy" to someone else's child, been warmly embraced by someone else's husband, and was now sniveling on someone else's porch. A convincing explanation to the someone else looked so difficult that the best way would be to get clear as soon as possible, and avoid it.

She gave a final dab and got up

with decision. She retrieved her bag from the medley of teddybears and teacups, and glanced at the mirror in the flap. She frowned at it and burrowed for her compact.

The sound of a step caused her to look up. A woman was coming in through the gateway, a moderately tall, nicely built woman, dressed in a light-green linen suit, and carrying it well. A woman a few years' older than herself, though still . . . but at that moment the woman turned so that Frances could see her face, and all coherent thought expired.

Frances' jaw sagged. She gaped.

THE other woman noticed her. She looked hard at Frances, but showed no great surprise. She turned off the path and came across the grass. There was nothing alarming about her. In fact, she was wearing the trace of a smile.

"Hullo!" she said. "I was thinking this morning that you must be due somewhere about now."

Frances' bag dropped from her fingers and spilled at her feet, but her eyes never left the other's face.

The woman's eyes were a little deeper and wiser than those she was wont to see in the mirror. There were the very faintest touches of shadows at their corners, and at the corners of the mouth. The lips favored a shade just a trace darker. Something as indescribable as the touch of dew

had been exchanged for a breath of sophistication. But otherwise . . . otherwise . . .

Frances tried to speak, but all that came was a croak, strangled in rising panic.

"It's all right," said the other. "Nothing to be scared about." She linked her arm into Frances' and led her back to the porch. "Now sit down there and just relax. You don't need to worry a bit."

Frances sank unresistingly into the chair and stared dumbly at her.

"Cigarette?" the other suggested. "Oh, no, of course. I didn't, then." She took one for herself and lit it. For what seemed a long time, they surveyed one another through the smoke. It was the other who broke the silence. She said:

"How pretty—and charming! If I had only understood more—still, I suppose one could scarcely have had innocence *and* experience." She sighed, with a touch of wistfulness. Then she shook her head. "No. Being young is very exhausting and unsatisfactory, really—although it looks so nice."

FRANCES swallowed with difficulty. "Er—I think I must be going mad."

The other shook her head. "Oh, no, you're not. Nothing like it. Just take it easy and try to relax."

"But this! I mean, you—me—as if—oh, I *am* going mad! I must be. It's—it's impossible!" Frances pro-

tested wildly. "Nobody can possibly be in two places at once. I mean nobody can be twice in the same place at once. I mean one person can't be two people, not at the same—"

The other leaned across and patted her hand.

"There, there, now. Calm down. I know it's terribly bewildering at first, but it comes out all right. I remember."

"Y—you *remember*?" stammered Frances.

"From when it happened to me, of course. From when I was where you are now."

Frances stared at her, with a sensation of slowly and helplessly drowning.

"Look," said the other. "I think I'd better get you a drink. I know you don't take it, but this *is* rather exceptional. I remember how much better I felt for it. Just a minute." She got up and went indoors.

Frances sat back, holding hard to both arms of her chair for reassurance. She felt as if she were falling over and over, a long way down.

The other came back holding a glass, and gave it to her. She drank, spluttering a little over the strange taste. But the other was right; she did immediately begin to feel somewhat better.

"Of course it's a shock," said the other. "And you are right about one person not being in two places

—up to a point. But the way I think it must happen is that you just *seem* to go on being the same person. But you never can be, not really. I mean, since the cells that make you are always being gradually replaced, you can't really be *all* the same person at any two times, can you?"

Frances tried to follow that, without success.

"Well—I suppose not *quite*," she conceded, doubtfully.

THE other went on talking, giving her time to recover.

"Well, then, when *all* the cells have been replaced, every seven years or so, then you can't *any* of you be the same person any longer, although you still think you are. So that means that the cells that make up you and me are two quite different sets of cells—so they aren't really having to be in two different places at once, although it does look like it, don't you see?"

"I—er—perhaps," said Frances, on a slightly hysterical note.

"So that sets a sort of natural limit," the other went on. "I mean there obviously has to be a minimum gap of seven years or so in which it's quite impossible for this to happen at all—until all your present cells have been replaced by others, you see."

"I—I suppose so."

"Just take another drink of that.

It'll do you good," the other advised.

Frances did, and leaned back again in the chair. She wished her head would stop whirling. She didn't understand a word that the woman—her other self; whoever it was—had said. All she knew was that none of it could possibly make sense. She kept hanging on to the arms of the chair until, presently, she began to feel herself growing calmer.

"Better? You've more color now," the other said.

Frances nodded. She could feel the tears of a reaction not far away. The other came over and put an arm around her.

"Poor dear, what a time you are having! All this confusion, and then falling in love on top of it—as if that weren't confusing enough by itself."

"F—falling in love?" asked Frances.

"Why, yes. I remember so well. He kissed you, and patted your behind—and you fell in love."

OH, dear—is it like that? I didn't—" Frances broke off. "But how did you know about—? Oh, I see—of course . . ."

"And he's a darling. You'll adore him. And little Betty's a love, too, bless her," the other told her. She paused, and added, "I'm afraid you've rather a lot to go through first, but it's worth it.

You'll remember it's worth it all?"

"Yes-s-s," Frances told her, vaguely. She thought for a moment of the man who had come out of the house and vanished in the car. He would be— "Yes," she said, more emphatically.

She pondered for some seconds, and then turned to look critically at the other.

"I suppose one does have to grow old—er—older, I mean," she amended. "Somehow I've never thought—"

The other laughed. "Of course you haven't. But it's really very nice, I assure you. Such a much less anxious state than being young. Though, naturally, you won't believe that."

Frances let her eyes wander around the porch and across the garden. They came to rest on the teddybears and the delinquent, golliwog. She smiled.

"But—I think I do," she said.

The other smiled, too, her eyes a little shiny.

"I really was rather a sweet thing," she said.

She got up, abruptly.

"You must go, my dear," she said. "You've got to get back to that horrid old woman."

Frances obediently got up, too. The other seemed to have some idea of what she was talking about, and what was necessary. Frances herself had little enough.

"Back to the Señora?"

The other nodded without speaking. She put her arms around Frances and held her close to her. She kissed her gently. "Oh, my dear!" she said unsteadily, and turned her head away.

Frances walked down the short drive. At the gate she turned and looked back, taking it all in.

The other, on the porch, kissed her hand to her. Then she put it over her eyes and ran into the house.

Frances turned to the right and walked back by the way she had come, toward the town and the Señora.

THE cloudiness cleared. The crystal became just a glass ball again. Beyond it sat Señora Rosa, with her comb awry. Her left hand held Frances' wrist. Frances stared at her for some moments.

"You *are* a cheat," she burst out. "You were telling lies, too. It wasn't Edward. He wasn't a bit *like* Edward." She pulled her arm free with a sudden wrench. "Cheat!" she repeated. "You told me Edward and you showed me somebody else. It's all cruel silly lies and cheating. All of it."

Her vehemence was enough to take the Señora a little aback.

"There was jus' a little mistake," she admitted. "By 'n unfortunate—"

"Mistake!" shouted Frances. "The mistake was my ever coming

in here at all. You've just made a fool of me and I hate you!"

The Señora recoiled, and then rallied slightly. With a touch of dignity she said: "The 'xplanation's really quite shimplé. It was—"

"No!" Frances shouted. "I don't want to hear any more about it."

She pushed the table with all her force. The edge of it caught the Señora in the middle. Her chair teetered backward. Then she, table, crystal, and lamp went down all in a heap, and Frances sprang for the door.

The Señora grunted and rolled over. She struggled stertorously to her feet, leaving comb and mantilla in the debris.

"You idiotic little duffer," she shouted. "That was your *shecond* marriage—an' I shay the hell with *both* of 'em."

But Frances was already out in the street, beyond earshot.

A VERY unpleasant experience—humiliating, too, thought Frances, as she pegged along with the jolting step of the outraged. Humiliating because—well, because she had nearly—no, she'd be honest, for a time she *had* fallen for it. It had all seemed so convincingly, so really real. Even now she could scarcely believe that she hadn't walked up that drive, sat on that porch, talked to . . . but what a ridiculous thing to think. As if it could possibly be.

All the same, to find herself facing that horrible Señora again, and realize that it had all been some kind of trick . . . If she weren't in the public street now, she could have kicked herself, and wept with mortification.

Presently, however, as the first flush of her anger began to cool, she became more aware of her surroundings. A number of the people she was passing were looking at her with curiosity—not quite the right kind of curiosity . . .

She glanced down at her frock, and stopped dead. It was not her familiar blue and white striped cotton, but an affair covered with a niggly pattern of palm trees and pineapples. She raised her eyes again and looked around. Every other cotton frock in sight was inches longer and far fuller than hers.

Frances blushed. She walked on, trying to look as if she were not blushing; trying, also, to pretend that the skimpy frock did not make her feel as if she had come out dressed in a rather inadequate bath towel.

There was, of course, clearly one thing to be done about that; and done at once.

She made haste toward Weilberg's Modes.



and not quite human

By JOE L. HENSLEY

What's more bloodthirsty than the

remains of an exterminated race?

Illustrated by JAMES

THEY won of course. One ship against a world, but they won easily.

The Regents would be pleased. Another planet for colonization—even a few specimens for the labs. Earthmen, who had incredibly lived through the attack.

Forward, in a part of the great

ship where the complex control panels whirled and clicked, two of the Arcturians conferred together.

"How are the Earth specimens, Doctor?" the older one asked, his voice indifferent. He touched his splendid purple pants, straightening the already precise creases.

"They stare at the walls, Captain. They do not eat what we give them. They seem to look through the guards, say very little and use their bodies feebly. I do not think that all of them will live through the trip."

"They are weak. It only shows the laboratories are wrong. Our people are *not* related to them—despite the similarity in appearance. No, we are cast in a stronger mold than that." He drummed his desk with impatient fingers. "Well—we can't let them die. Force-feed them if necessary. Our scientists demand specimens; we are lucky that some of them lived through the attack. I don't see how it was possible—it was such a splendid attack."

"They have no real sickness, not even a radiation burn in the lot of them," the doctor said. "But they are weak and morose."

"Keep them alive and well, Doctor."

The doctor searched the captain's metallic face. "Captain, do you ever have dreams?"

"Eh—dreams?" It took the captain a moment to comprehend. "Dreams are forbidden by the Regents! They show instability."

"The men, Sir . . . some of the crew have been complaining."

"Complaining! Complaining's expressly forbidden in the rules. You know that, Doctor. Why haven't I been informed?"

"It was such a little thing, something psychological, I think. I've had a few in who've had nightmares." The doctor made a deprecatory gesture. "Space fear, I think. Most of the men complaining were first trippers."

"Make a list of the names and submit it to me. We have to eliminate such types, as you should know."

"Yes, Sir." The doctor got up to leave.

"Uh—Doctor—did they tell you what the dreams were about?"

"Blood, Sir." The doctor shook his head and clenched his antiseptic, scoured hands. "Skulls and bats and old women around a bubbling pot; bony shadows that trapped them when they ran."

"Rot."

"Yes, Sir."

THE doctor walked down the gleaming passageway, seeing the men like well oiled machines; the talented men, each in his own technical job, each uniform precisely the same, the teeth, clean and white, each face and body cut from the same matrix, even the boots alike, dark shiny mirrors. Unlined faces—young, unlike the skeleton faces in the hold.

The first guard brought hand to forehead in a snappy salute. "Yes, Sir?"

"Prisoner inspection."

The door whined open and the

doctor started through.

"Sir!" The urgency in the guard's voice detained him.

"Yes?" He remembered the man as one of the ones who had been at sick call that morning.

"May I be relieved? I feel ill. I've been sick since — since last sleep period."

The doctor looked impassively at the too-white eyes. *Better not let it start*, he thought.

"Stand your duty. I can't have you relieved. You know the rules."

"But, Sir!"

"Report to sickbay after you are relieved. For psychoanalysis — and I mean after you are *regularly* relieved!" The doctor again looked into the frightened eyes and considered making an exception this one time. *No, there'll be more then*, he thought.

The automatic salute reassured him. "Yes, Sir."

"Your name?" He wrote it in his prescription book and walked on.

First cell, second cell, the fifteenth; all the same. The listless faces, the hungry deadmen's eyes watching him. Eyes cut from coffins. Twenty-two cells — two to a cell, women segregated as they should be. Forty-four prisoners in all.

Eighty-eight eyes watching him. He shivered inwardly.

How many were there? he thought. *Forty-four individuals left*

out of a billion or two?

He read the guards' notebooks. "Man in cell fourteen, Name: Alexander Green. Was observed drawing strange patterns on the deck with chalk. Chalk taken away from him. No resistance."

"Woman in cell three, Name: Elizabeth Gout. Talking to herself and to the walls. Was quieted by her cellmate, Meg Newcomb, on orders of Corporal of the Guard."

The shadows were thick in the prisoners' hold; the lights dim, the only sounds were the thrum of the rhythmic atomic engines and the click of the guards' heels as each one came to attention and presented his book for inspection.

The Corporal of the Guard walked silently behind him and took the orders down at the end of the cell block.

"Force-feed them. Bring the vitamin lights down here. Give them injections." The doctor paused and stared coldly. "The guard at cell four was inept in his salute. Place him on report."

"Yes, Sir."

"Anything else to report, Corporal?"

The man hesitated; then said, "Some of the guards are jumpy."

"And the prisoners?" the doctor asked caustically.

The corporal was flustered. "They seem stronger, Sir."

"They're getting acclimated to

the conditions of the trip."

"They still haven't eaten anything."

"I said—in case you misunderstood me, Corporal—that they are getting acclimated to the trip. You may consider yourself on report too." The doctor enunciated each word savagely.

The corporal clicked his heels and the doctor went quickly back up the line of cells. He averted his head, not looking into the cells. An electronic device scanned him and opened the door as it read his identity.

He went through the hatch, felt it close quickly behind him, and disregarded the guard who had wanted to be relieved. He went on to his own office in the small, efficient sickbay. He slumped over his desk exhausted.

THERE was a sound of running feet outside. Then the door to his office was almost torn from its hinges as a soundless blast of energy struck it. The doctor leaped to his feet and flung open the metal door.

The sick guard stood there, weaving drunkenly on boneless legs. "Stand back, Doctor. I see one over by the wall. See it over there?" the man screamed. "It's coming for me. Can't get away—can't." He raised the pistol as the doctor watched.

"Stop—You damned fool!"

The man lay on the floor, gun pointed at his own shapeless body, his torso a mass of torn, charred tissue. His eyes were still open and they stared sightlessly at the small porthole, beyond which the luminous stars reeled.

The sight was not revolting to the doctor, but the implications were. He had seen too many dead, both of his own race and others, to care particularly about one more. It was what this death might mean to him personally that worried him—what the Regents might say.

He called the guard on watch and gave orders automatically until the task of examining and disposing was done. There were necessary papers to fill out and sign, the personal effects to be inventoried—and the report to the captain. And all the time he was engaged in the routine, his mind flashed the question: *I wonder what it will mean to me when we get back? The Regents will want to examine me. They'll say it was my fault.* He felt the panic begin to rise, but his body made the necessary responses and his face was imperturbable.

He went to the captain's office.

"Why did he do it, Doctor?" The captain was more perplexed than angry.

The doctor stonily replied, "We're in space."

"We have a hundred million

men in space!" the captain exclaimed. "Few of them ever commit suicide. It's been bred out of the race. It just doesn't happen." He pounded his hand against his plastic desk, the almost muted sound incongruous with the angry gesture. "I want to know why. It's against the rules—you know that."

The doctor did not flinch. "He was a first tripper. First time away from home. A guard? No—a farm-boy in uniform, that's what he was." The doctor found himself almost homicidally angry at the dead guard. *What right does he have to cause me all this trouble?*

THE captain watched him strangely. "That's what most of our men are—men from farms. I'm from a farm myself." The captain eyed him dubiously while the insidious sounds of the machines rocked and jolted around them. "You're tired, Doctor. You need some rest."

The doctor ignored the remark. "Maybe it's the prisoners. All the guards who have complained have been standing prisoner watches."

"I've seen the prisoners." The barking voice was contemptuous.

Have you seen them? Have you seen the way they look at you? the doctor thought, but aloud he said, through regulated teeth: "Yes, Sir."

"Find out what's wrong."

"Yes, Sir. I'll do my best." Spit and polish and everything according to the rules.

"Report to me on everything."

"Of course, Captain."

"Do an autopsy—look at his brain."

"I did, Sir." He fought to keep his voice rational. "We kept his head. We always do in a case like this."

"Do it again." The captain stared penetratingly at him. "Find out what was wrong with his head, so that we can eliminate it from the race. Something was wrong with his head—that was it. Find out!"

"Yes, Sir!" *Feet together, salute, turn—keep your back straight. Be a soldier, be a spaceman, be an Arcturian, be strong—be a conqueror.*

The doctor went back to his own office and sat down shakily at his plastic desk. Then he fought his way upright again and looked in the room's small mirror.

Still the same. I'm still the same—but so tired—why am I so tired?

He touched his face. "Same face." *But it was more deeply marked and harsh now.*

His hair: "Like always." *Is that a streak of gray?*

His eyes: "They see." *What do they see? What? What?*

And then, for the first time, his tightly held mind barrier let down and he admitted the dreams

and the long sleepless periods to himself. Remembered them for what they were. Knew he could no longer fool himself.

Insects crawling on him; a great gray rat with canine teeth at his throat, while bats eyed him evilly—and curious women who plied their trade around a bubbling pot, their thin-edged voices plotting more horrors. And always the shadows, shadows that leaped and tore at his unprotected body, shadows that had a definite form—shadows which faded disconcertingly just as he seemed to be able to make out the faces that were sickeningly familiar.

The nightmares became real to him.

Quite suddenly, the nightmares came close to him as he sat at the plastic desk and together they planned the ghastly joke, while they laughed together. He nicked, with surgical care, the arteries in his wrists and groins and smiled as he bubbled away on the metal desk.

"Goodby, Doctor," said a voice.

Goodby, Voice. And the sound echoed while the uniform became discolored, the boots greasy with death, the face too white—smiling and staring.

And the others—the many others—soon.

For three sleep periods the machines sighed as the carnage went on. The captain put out directives

and took the guns away. After that they found other ways. Crewmen jumped out the escape hatches and into the atomic convertors—or smashed their heads against the steel bulkheads.

For three sleep periods.

EACH time he heard the clicking of the guard's heels, the captain almost screamed. In his imagination, he was seeing the Arcturian Regents. They were pointing accusing fingers at him, while the extermination chambers waited.

"Your ship," they said.

"My ship," he admitted.

"The doctor, half of your crew dead. How—why did they die?"

"Suicide." He trembled under the blanket.

"It's against the rules, Captain," the voices said calmly, convicting him.

"I told them."

"But you are the captain. The captain is responsible. The rule says that."

"Yes—the doctor said it was the prisoners."

The Regents laughed. "For the good of the race, we have no choice but . . ."

The captain pulled the covers tighter over his aching head and lay stiffly on his cot. He drowned the voices in a sea of his own making, smiling as he saw each hand disappear under the stormy



waves. For a while he lay that way, while the juggernaut shadows slipped carefully about the room, hovering and watchful.

And then, once again, he could hear the whine of the great engines. He sat up.

The old man—the one listed on the rolls as Adam Manning, one of the specimen Earthmen—sat on one of the stiff chairs by the captain's desk.

"Hello," the old man said.

"Guards!" screamed the captain.

But no one answered. Only the machines roared on, replying softly in their unhearing way.

"Guards!" the captain screamed again as he watched the old man's face.

"They can't hear you," the old man said.

The captain knew instinctively that it was true. "*You* did it!" He strained to leap from his cot at the old man. He could not move. His hands clenched as he fought against invisible bonds.

He began to cry. But the Regents' voices came, stopping it. "Crying's against the rules," they said stiffly, without pity.

The old man smiled at him from the chair. The shadows murmured softly, conferring in myriad groups, dirtying the aseptic bulk-

heads. They drew closer to the captain and he could only half-stifle a scream.

"What are you?" he managed.

"Something you've trained out of your people. You wouldn't understand even if we told you, because you don't believe that there ever was anything like us." The old man smiled. "We're your new Regents." The shadows smiled hideously, agreeing, and revealing their long, canine teeth.

"IT WAS a wonderful attack, Captain," the old man said softly. The shadows nodded as they formed and faded. "Nothing human could have lived through it—nothing human did. Some of us were deep underground where they'd buried us long ago—the stakes through our hearts—they knew how to deal with us. But your fire burned the stakes away."

He waved a scaly hand at the shadows. They came down upon the captain relentlessly.

The captain began to scream.

Then, there was only the automatic sound of the machines.

The ship roared on through space.

Joe L. Hensley

Youngsters are too practical these days.

To them, what Prentiss believed is just . . .



kid stuff

By

ISAAC ASIMOV

THE first pang of nausea had passed and Jan Prentiss said, "Damn it, you're an insect."

It was a statement of fact, not an insult, and the thing that sat on Prentiss's desk said, "Of course."

It was about a foot long, very thin, and in shape a far-fetched, miniature caricature of a human being. Its stalklike arms and legs

originated in pairs from the upper portion of its body. The legs were longer and thicker than the arms. They extended the length of the body, then bent forward at the knee.

The creature sat upon those knees and when it did so, the stub of its fuzzy abdomen just cleared Prentiss's desk.

There was plenty of time for Prentiss to absorb these details.

Illustrated by MacINTYRE

The object had no objection to being stared at. It seemed to welcome it, in fact, as though it were used to exciting admiration.

"What are you?" Prentiss did not feel completely rational. Five minutes ago, he had been seated at his typewriter, working leisurely on a fantasy story he hoped would sell. He had been in a perfectly usual frame of mind. He had felt quite fine—quite sane.

And then a block of air immediately to the right of the typewriter had shimmered, clouded over and condensed into the little horror that dangled its black and shiny feet over the edge of the desk.

PRENTISS wondered, in a detached sort of way, why he bothered talking to it. This was the first time his profession had so crudely affected his dreams. It *must* be a dream, he told himself.

"I'm an Avalonian," it said. "I'm from Avalon, in other words." Its tiny face ended in a mandibular mouth. Two swaying three-inch antennae rose from a spot above either eye, while the eyes themselves gleamed richly in their many-faceted fashion. There was no sign of nostrils.

Naturally not, thought Prentiss wildly. It has to breathe through vents in its abdomen. It must be talking with its abdomen then. Or using telepathy.

"Avalon!" he said, stupidly. He thought, Avalon? The land of the fay in King Arthur's time?

"Certainly," said the creature, answering the thought smoothly. "I'm an elf."

"Oh, no!" Prentiss put his hands to his face, took them away, and found the elf still there, its feet thumping against the top drawer. Prentiss was not a drinking man, or a nervous one. In fact, he was considered a very prosaic sort of person by his neighbors. He had a comfortable paunch, a reasonable but not excessive amount of hair on his head, an amiable wife and an active ten-year-old son. His neighbors were, of course, kept ignorant of the fact that he paid off the mortgage on his house by writing fantasies of one sort or another.

Till now, however, this secret vice had never affected his psyche. To be sure, his wife had shaken her head over his addiction many times. It was her standard opinion that he was wasting, even perverting, his talents.

"Who on Earth reads these things?" she would say. "All that stuff about demons and gnomes and wishing rings and elves. All that *kid* stuff, if you want my frank opinion."

"You're quite wrong," Prentiss would reply, stiffly. "Modern fantasies are very sophisticated and mature treatments of folk-motifs.

Behind the facade of glib unreality, there frequently lie trenchant comments on the world of today. Fantasy in modern style is, above all, adult fare."

Blanche shrugged. She had heard him speak at conventions so these comments weren't new to her.

"Besides," he would add, "fantasies pay the mortgage, don't they?"

"Maybe so," she would reply, "but it would be nice if you'd switch to mysteries. At least you'd get quarter reprint sales out of those and we could even tell the neighbors what you do for a living."

JAN Prentiss groaned in spirit. Blanche could come in now at any time and find him talking to himself (it was too real for a dream; it might be a hallucination). After that he *would* have to write mysteries for a living—or take to work.

"You're quite wrong," said the elf. "This is neither a dream nor a hallucination."

"Then why don't you go away?" asked Prentiss.

"I intend to. This is scarcely my idea of a place to live. And you're coming with me."

"I am *not*. What the hell do you think you are, telling me what I'm going to do?"

"If you think that's a respectful

way to speak to a representative of an older culture, I can't say much for your upbringing."

"You're not an older culture—" He wanted to add: You're just a figment of my imagination; but he had been a writer too long to be able to bring himself to commit the cliché.

"We elves," said the insect, freezingly, "existed half a billion years before the first mammal was invented. We watched the dinosaurs come in, and we watched them go out. As for you man-things—strictly newcomers."

For the first time, Prentiss noticed that, from the spot on the elf's body where its limbs sprouted, a third vestigial pair existed as well. It increased the insecticity of the object and Prentiss's sense of indignation grew.

He said, "You needn't waste your company on social inferiors."

"I wouldn't," said the elf, "believe me. But necessity drives, you know. It's a rather complicated story, but when you hear it, you'll *want* to help."

Prentiss said, uneasily, "Look, I don't have much time. Blanche—my wife will be in here any time. She'll be upset."

"She won't be here," said the elf. "I've set up a block in her mind."

"What!"

"Quite harmless, I assure you. But after all, we can't afford to

be disturbed, can we?"

Prentiss sat back in his chair, dazed and unhappy.

THE elf said, "We elves began our association with you man-things immediately after the last ice age began. It had been a miserable time for us, as you can imagine. We couldn't wear animal carcasses or live in holes, as your uncouth ancestors did. It took incredible stores of psychic energy to keep warm."

"Incredible stores of what?"

"Psychic energy! You know nothing at all about it. Your mind is too coarse to grasp the concept. Please, don't interrupt."

The elf continued, "Necessity drove us to experiment with your people's brains. They were crude, but large. The cells were inefficient, almost worthless, but there were a vast number of them. We could use those brains as a concentrating device, a type of psychic lens, and increase the available energy which our own minds could tap. We survived the ice age handily, without having to retreat to the tropics, as in previous such eras.

"Of course, we were spoiled. When warmth returned, we didn't abandon the man-things. We used them to increase our standard of living generally. We could travel faster, eat better, do more, and we lost our old, simple, virtuous

way of life forever. Then, too, there was milk."

"Milk?" said Prentiss. "I don't see any connection."

"A divine liquid. I only tasted it once in my life. But elfen classic poetry speaks of it in superlatives. In the old days, men always supplied us plentifully. Why mammals of all things should be blessed with it and insects not, is a complete mystery. How unfortunate it is that the man-things got out of hand."

"They did?"

"Two hundred years ago."

"Good for us!"

"Don't be narrow-minded," said the elf, stiffly. "It was a useful association for all parties, until you man-things learned to handle physical energies in quantity. It was just the sort of gross thing your minds are capable of."

"What was wrong with it?"

"It's hard to explain. It was all very well for us to light up our nightly revels with fire-flies brightened by use of two man-power of psychic energy. But then you installed electric lights. Our antennal reception is good for miles, but then you invented telegraphs, telephones and radios. Our kobolds mined ore with much greater efficiency than you did, until you man-things invented dynamite. Do you see?"

"No."

"Surely, you don't expect sensi-

tive and superior creatures such as elves to watch a group of hairy mammals outdo them. It wouldn't be so bad if we could imitate the electronic development ourselves, but our psychic energies were insufficient for the purpose. Well, we retreated from reality. We sulked, pined and drooped. Call it an inferiority complex, if you will, but from two centuries ago onward, we slowly abandoned mankind and retreated to such centers as Avalon."

PRENTISS thought furiously. "Let's get this straight. You can handle minds?"

"Certainly."

"You can make me think you're invisible? Hypnotically, I mean?"

"A crude term, but yes."

"And when you appeared just now, you did it by lifting a kind of mental block. Is that it?"

"To answer your thoughts, rather than your words: You are not sleeping; you are not mad; and I am not supernatural."

"I was just making sure. I take it, then, you can read my mind."

"Of course. It is a rather dirty, unrewarding sort of labor, but I can do it when I must. Your name is Prentiss and you write imaginative fiction. You have one larva who is at a place of instruction. I know a great deal about you."

Prentiss winced. "And just where is Avalon?"

"You won't find it." The elf clacked his mandibles together two or three times. "Don't speculate on the possibility of warning the authorities. You'd find yourself in an insane asylum. Avalon—in case you think the knowledge will help you—is in the middle of the Atlantic and quite invisible, you know. After the steamboat was invented, you man-things got to moving about so unreasonably, that we had to cloak the whole island with a psychic shield."

"Of course, incidents *will* take place. Once a huge, barbaric vessel hit us dead center and it took all the psychic energy of the entire population to give the island the appearance of an iceberg. The Titanic, I believe, was the name printed on the vessel. And nowadays, there are planes flying overhead all the time and sometimes there are crashes. We picked up cases of canned milk once. That's when I tasted it."

Prentiss said, "Well then, damn it, why aren't you still on Avalon? Why did you leave?"

"I was ordered to leave," said the elf, angrily. "The fools."

"Oh?"

"You know how it is when you're a little different. I'm not like the rest of them and the poor tradition-ridden fools resented it. They were jealous. That's the best explanation. Jealous!"

"How are you different?"

"Hand me that light bulb," said the elf. "Oh, just unscrew it! You don't need a reading lamp in the daytime."

With a quiver of revulsion, Prentiss did as he was told and passed the object into the little hands of the elf. Carefully, the elf, with fingers so thin and wiry that they looked like tendrils, touched the bottom and side of the brass base.

Feebly, the filament in the bulb reddened.

"Good God!" said Prentiss.

"That," said the elf proudly, "is my great talent. I told you that we elves couldn't adapt psychic energy to electronics. Well, I can! I'm not just an ordinary elf. I'm a mutant! A super-elf! This light is due just to the activity of my own mind, you know. Now, watch when I use yours as a focus."

As he said that, the bulb's filament grew white hot and painful to look at, while a vague and not unpleasant tickling sensation entered Prentiss's skull.

THE lamp went out and the elf put the bulb on the desk behind the typewriter.

"I haven't tried," said the elf, proudly, "but I suspect I can fission uranium, too."

"But look here, lighting a bulb takes energy. You can't just hold it—"

"I've told you about psychic energy. Great Oberon, man-thing, try to understand."

Prentiss felt increasingly uneasy. He said cautiously, "What do you intend doing with this gift of yours?"

"Go back to Avalon, of course. I *should* let those fools go to their doom, but an elf does have a certain patriotism, even if he is a Coleoptera."

"A *what*?"

"We elves are not all of a species, you know. I'm of beetle descent. See?"

He rose to his feet and, standing on the desk, turned his back to Prentiss. What had seemed merely a shining black cuticle suddenly split and lifted. From underneath, two filmy, veined wings fluttered out.

"Oh, you can fly," said Prentiss.

"You're very foolish," said the elf, contemptuously, "not to realize I'm too large for flight. But they *are* attractive, aren't they? How do you like the iridescence? The Lepidoptera have disgusting wings in comparison. They're gaudy and indelicate. What's more, they're always sticking out."

"The Lepidoptera?" Prentiss felt hopelessly confused.

"The butterfly clans. They're the proud ones. They were always letting humans see them so they could be admired. Very petty minds in a way. And that's why your legends

always give fairies butterfly wings instead of beetle wings, which are *much* more diaphanously beautiful. We'll give the Lepidoptera what for when we get back—you and I."

"Now hold on—"

"Just think," said the elf, swaying back and forth in what might be elfen ecstasy, "our nightly revels on the fairy green will be a blaze of sparkling light from curlicues of neon tubing. We can cut loose the swarms of wasps we've got hitched to our flying wagons and install internal combustion motors instead. We can stop this business of curling up on leaves, when it's time to sleep, and build factories to manufacture decent mattresses. I tell you, we'll *live*.—And the rest of them will eat dirt for having ordered me out."

BUT I can't go with you," bleated Prentiss. "I have responsibilities. I have a wife and kid. You wouldn't take a man away from his—his larvae, would you?"

"I'm not cruel," said the elf. He turned his eyes full on Prentiss. "I have an elfin soul. Still, what choice have I? I must have a man-brain for focusing purposes or I will accomplish nothing . . . and not all man-brains are suitable."

"Why not?"

"Great Oberon, creature. A man-brain isn't a passive thing of

wood and stone. It must cooperate in order to be useful. And it can only cooperate by being fully aware of our own elfin ability to manipulate it. I can use your brain, for instance, but your wife's would be useless to me. It would take her years to understand who and what I am."

Prentiss said, "This is a damned insult. Are you telling me I believe in fairies? I'll have you know I'm a complete rationalist."

"Are you? When I first revealed myself to you, you had a few feeble thoughts about dreams and hallucinations but once you talked to me, you accepted me. Your wife would have screamed and gone into hysterics."

Prentiss was silent. He could think of no answer.

"That's the trouble," said the elf, despondently. "Practically all you humans have forgotten about us since we left you. Your minds have closed; grown useless. To be sure, your larvae believe in your legends about the Little Folk, but their brains are undeveloped and useful only for simple processes. When they mature, they lose belief. Frankly, I don't know what I would do if it weren't for you fantasy writers."

"What do you mean, we fantasy writers?"

"You are the few remaining adults who believe in the insect-folk. You, Prentiss, most of all.

You've been a fantasy writer for twenty years."

"You're mad. I don't believe the things I write."

"You have to. You can't help it. I mean, while you're actually writing, you take the subject matter seriously. After a while your mind is just naturally cultivated into usefulness. But why argue? I *have* used you. You saw the light bulb brighten. So you see you must come with me."

"But I won't," Prentiss set his limbs stubbornly. "Can you make me against my will?"

"I could, but I might damage you, and I wouldn't want that. Suppose we say this. If you don't agree to come, I could focus a current of high-voltage electricity through your wife. It would be a revolting thing to have to do but I understand your own people execute enemies of the state in that fashion . . . so you would probably find the punishment less horrible than I do. I wouldn't want to seem brutal even to a man-thing."

PRENTISS grew conscious of the perspiration matting the short hairs on his temple.

"Wait," he said, "don't do anything like that. Let's talk it over."

The elf shot out his filmy wings, fluttered them, and returned them to their case. "Talk, talk, talk! It's tiring. Surely you have milk in

the house. You're not a very thoughtful host or you would have offered me refreshment before this."

Prentiss tried to bury the thought that came to him, to push it as far below the outer skin of his mind as he could. He said, casually, "I have something better than milk. Here, I'll get it for you."

"Stay where you are. Call to your wife. She'll bring it."

"But I don't want her to see you. It would frighten her."

The elf said, "You need feel no concern. I'll handle her so that she won't be the least disturbed."

Prentiss lifted an arm.

The elf said, "Any attack you make on me will be far slower than the bolt of electricity that will strike your wife."

Prentiss's arm dropped. He stepped to the door of his study.

"Blanche!" he called down the stairs.

Blanche was just visible in the living room, sitting woodenly in the armchair near the bookcase. She seemed to be asleep, open-eyed.

Prentiss turned to the elf. "Something's wrong with her."

"She's just in a state of sedation. She'll hear you. Tell her what to do."

"Blanche!" he called again. "Bring the container of eggnog and a small glass, will you?"

With no sign of animation other than that of bare movement, Blanche rose and disappeared from view.

"What is eggnog?" asked the elf.

Prentiss attempted enthusiasm. "It is a compound of milk, sugar, and eggs beaten to a delightful consistency. Milk alone is poor stuff compared to it."

Blanche entered with the eggnog. Her pretty face was expressionless. Her eyes turned toward the elf, but lightened with no realization of the significance of the sight.

"Here, Jan," she said, and sat down in the old, leather-covered chair by the window, hands falling loosely to her lap.

Prentiss watched her uneasily for a moment. "Are you going to keep her here?"

"She'll be easier to control. Well, aren't you going to offer me the eggnog?"

"Oh, sure. Here!"

HE poured the thick white liquid into the cocktail glass. He had prepared five milk-bottles of it two nights before for some friends they planned to entertain and it had been mixed with a lavish hand.

The elf's antennae trembled violently.

"A heavenly aroma," he muttered.

He wrapped the ends of his thin arms about the stem of the small glass and lifted it to his mouth. The liquid's level sank. When half was gone, he put it down and sighed, "Oh, the loss to my people. What a creation! What a thing to exist! Our histories tell us that in ancient days an occasional lucky sprite managed to take the place of a man-larva at birth so that he might draw off the liquid fresh-made. I wonder if even those ever experienced anything like this."

Prentiss said with a touch of professional interest, "That's the idea behind this business of changelings, is it?"

"Of course. The female man-thing has a great gift. Why not take advantage of it?" The elf turned his eyes upon the rise and fall of Blanche's bosom and sighed again.

Prentiss said, trying desperately not to sound too eager, "Go ahead. Drink all you want."

He, too, watched Blanche, waiting for signs of restoring animation, waiting for the beginnings of breakdown in the elf's control.

The elf said, "When is your larva returning from its place of instruction? I need him."

"Soon, soon," said Prentiss, nervously. He looked at his wrist-watch. Actually, Jan, Jr., would be home, yelling for a slab of

cake and milk, in something like fifteen minutes.

"Fill 'er up," he said urgently. "Fill 'er up."

The elf sipped gaily. He said, "Once the larva arrives, you may go."

"Go?"

"Only to the library. You'll have to get volumes on electronics. I'll need the details on how to build television, telephones, all that. I'll need to have rules on wiring, instructions for constructing vacuum tubes. Details, Prentiss, details! We have tremendous tasks ahead of us. Oil drilling, gasoline refining, motors, scientific agriculture. We'll build a new Avalon, you and I. A technical one. A scientific fairyland. We will create a new world."

"Great!" said Prentiss. "Here, don't neglect your drink."

"You see. You are catching fire with the idea," said the elf. "And you will be rewarded. You will have a dozen female man-things to yourself."

PRENTISS looked at Blanche automatically. No signs of hearing, but who could tell? He said, "I'd have no use for female man-th—for women, I mean."

"Come now," said the elf, censoriously, "be truthful. You man-things are well known to our folk as lecherous, bestial creatures. Mothers frightened their young

for generations by threatening them with man-things. Young, ah!" He lifted the glass of eggnog in the air and said, "To my own young," and drained it.

"Fill 'er up," said Prentiss at once. "Fill 'er up."

The elf did so. He said, "I'll have lots of children. I'll pick out the best of the coleoptresses and breed my line. I'll continue the mutation. Right now I'm the only one, but when we have a dozen, or fifty, I'll interbreed them and develop the race of the super-elf. A race of electro—urp—electronic marvels and infinite future. —If I could only drink more. Nectar! The original nectar!"

There was the sudden noise of a door being flung open and a young voice calling, "Mom! Hey, Mom!"

The elf, his glossy eyes a little dimmed, said, "Then we'll begin to take over the man-things. A few believe already; the rest we will—urp—teach. It will be the old days, but better; a more efficient elfhood, a tighter union."

Jan, Jr.'s voice was closer and tinged with impatience. "Hey, Mom! Ain't you home?"

Prentiss felt his eyes popping with tension. Blanche sat rigid. The elf's speech was slightly thick, his balance a little unsteady. If Prentiss were going to risk it, now, now was the time.

"Sit back," said the elf, peremptorily. "You're being foolish. I

knew there was alcohol in the eggnog from the moment you thought up your ridiculous scheme. You man-things are very shifty. We elves have many proverbs about you. Fortunately, alcohol has little effect upon us. Now if you had tried catnip with just a touch of honey in it—ah, here is the larva. How are you, little man-thing?"

The elf sat there, the goblet of eggnog halfway to his mandibles, while Jan, Jr., stood in the doorway. Junior's ten-year-old face was moderately smeared with dirt, his hair was immoderately matted, and there was a look of the utmost surprise in his gray eyes. His battered schoolbooks swayed from the end of the strap he held in his hand.

He said, "Pop! What's the matter with Mom? And—and what's *that*?"

The elf said to Prentiss, "Hurry to the library. No time must be lost. You know the books I need."

All trace of incipient drunkenness had left the creature and Prentiss's morale broke. The creature had been playing with him.

Prentiss got up to go.

THE elf said, "And nothing sneaky; no tricks. Your wife is still a hostage. I can use the larva's mind to kill her—it's good enough for that. I wouldn't want to do it. I'm *fa* member of the

Elfitarian Ethical Society and we advocate considerate treatment of mammals, so you may rely on my noble principles *if* you do as I say."

Prentiss felt a strong compulsion to leave flooding him. He stumbled toward the door.

Jan, Jr., cried, "Pop, it can talk! He said he'll kill Mom! Hey, Pop, don't go away!"

Prentiss was already out of the room, when he heard the elf say, "Don't stare at me, larva. I will not harm your mother if you do exactly as I say. I am an elf, a fairy. You know what a fairy is, of course."

And Prentiss was at the front door when he heard Junior's treble raised in wild shouting, followed by scream after scream in Blanche's shuddering soprano.

The strong, though invisible, elastic that was drawing Prentiss out of the house snapped and vanished. He fell backward, righted himself, and darted back up the stairs.

Blanche, fairly saturated with quivering life, was backed into a corner, her arms about a weeping Jan, Jr.

On the desk was a collapsed black carapace, covering a nasty smear of pulpiness from which colorless liquid dripped.

Junior was sobbing hysterically, "I hit it. I hit it with my school-books, 'cause it was hurting Mom."

AN hour passed and Prentiss felt the world of normality pouring back into the interstices left behind by the creature from Avalon. The elf itself was already ash in the incinerator behind the house, and the only remnant of its existence was the damp stain at the foot of the desk.

Blanche was still sickly pale. They talked in whispers.

Prentiss said, "How's Junior?"

"He's watching television."

"Is he all right?"

"Oh, *he's* all right, but *I'll* be having nightmares for weeks." She shuddered.

"I know. So will I unless we can get it out of our minds. I don't think there'll ever be another of those—things here."

Blanche said, "I can't explain how awful it was. I kept hearing every word he said, even when I was down in the living room."

"It was telepathy," Prentiss told her.

"I just couldn't move. Then, after you left, I could begin to stir a bit. I tried to scream, but all I could do was moan and whimper. Then Junior smashed him and all at once I was free. I don't understand how it happened."

Prentiss felt a certain gloomy satisfaction. "I think I know. I was under his control because I accepted the truth of his existence. He held you in check through me.

When I left the room, increasing distance made it harder to use my mind as a psychic lens and you could begin moving. By the time I reached the front door, the elf thought it was time to switch from my mind to Junior's. That was his mistake."

"In what way?" asked Blanche.

"He assumed that all children believe in fairies, but he was wrong. Here and now, in 20th Century America, children *don't* believe in fairies. They never hear of them. They believe in Tom Corbett, in Hopalong Cassidy, in Dick Tracy, in Howdy Doody, in Superman and a dozen other things . . . but not fairies.

"The elf just never realized the sudden cultural changes brought about by comic books and television, and when he tried to grab Junior's mind, he couldn't. Before he could recover his psychic balance, Junior was on top of him in a swinging panic because he thought you were being hurt, and it was all over.

"It's just as I've always said, Blanche. The ancient folk-motifs of legend survive only in the modern fantasy magazine, and modern fantasy is purely adult fare. You see my point?"

Blanche said humbly, "Yes, dear."

Prentiss put his hands in his pockets and grinned slowly. "You know, Blanche, next time I see

Walt Rae, I think I'll just drop a hint that I write the stuff. Time the neighbors knew, I think."

JAN, Jr., holding an enormous slice of jammed bread, wandered into his father's study in search of the dimming memory. Pop kept slapping him on the back, and Mom kept putting bread and jam in his hands, and he was forgetting why. There had been this big old thing on the desk that could talk—

It had all happened so quickly

that it got mixed up in his mind.

He shrugged his shoulders and, in the late afternoon sunlight, looked at the partly typewritten sheet in his father's typewriter, then at the small pile of paper resting on the desk.

He read a while, curled his lip and muttered, "Gee whiz. Fairies again. Always kid stuff!"—and wandered off.



Prediction

You'll meet yourself in the next issue's novella, *THE REAL PEOPLE* by Algis Budrys, even if you can't answer this question: Does *BEYOND Fantasy Fiction* exist because you wanted it . . . or do you exist because the magazine needs readers? The problem, you see, is not whether the chicken or the egg came first; it's whether the egg wanted the chicken or the chicken wanted the egg. Another way of stating it is—na, you read the story and see where its soul-shattering concept leads you!

Grammatically, *HOUSE . . . WIFE* should be one word, but Bayd Ellanby's novelet logically and frighteningly breaks it down into two vindictive components. When housewife meets house wife, the clash is immediate and remorseless . . . and fantastic!

Wyman Guin (who wrote the sensationally successful *BEYOND BEDLAM* for *GALAXY*) returns with an uneasy and yet remarkably moving novelet, *MY DARLING HECATE*. You'll feel uncomfortable and apprehensive with the beautiful heroine of the story . . . but you'll find her charming and lovable and so disastrously guileless that she would shock the brimstone out of the most hard-boiled demant!

THE GODDESS ON THE STREET CORNER

By MARGARET ST. CLAIR

Illustrated by BALBALIS

*Gods depend on people as much as people
depend on them — and sometimes more.*

Street corner in the late afternoon, when Paul was only a little drunk. Afterwards, he wondered how he could have thought even for a moment that she was a human being. Womanhood was a mask that she wore insecurely. Behind it was a divinity that though old, worn, thin as a thread, was inescapably real. But in that first encounter he thought she was a woman, and he yielded to an imperative that rarely touched him. He took her with him past the

liquor store, the grocery, the hock shop, and up to his room.

She stumbled a little as she went over the narrow threshold. Paul put out his hand to steady her, against her white arm. And then he knew.

It was as if he had touched something finer and more subtle than human flesh, something that thrilled with a cold, glowing, radiant life. No woman's arm could feel like that. He stared at her, his heart shaking with tenderness and reverential fear. His convic-

tion was absolute. It was all he could do to keep from throwing himself at her feet.

There was silence. She smiled faintly. He did not know how to address her, by what name to call her. At last he said, "What has happened to you?"

"We get old. Even the gods get old," she answered gravely. She was very pale, and her voice was different from what it had been in the street. He saw under her clothing her silver body was old, old beyond imagining, but still ineffably beautiful. He didn't know what to do. She was so pale he feared she would faint. But do you ask a goddess to please sit down?

Mutely he drew the room's one chair from the wall for her. As she seated herself, he went to the cupboard and got out the sherry jug hesitantly. He put it back. He couldn't ask her to drink what he drank. At last he got brandy, from a pint he had bought last month when he was flush, and brought it to her in a glass.

She sipped at it. The blood—no, some diviner fluid—came back to her cheeks. He began to walk up and down the room, turning to look at her.

SHE was sitting back in the chair, her lips curved in that faint smile. He thought: "She's like a silver lamp, like having the evening star itself, in my room." Once

she raised the glass to her lips and drank. The room seemed full of the reflections of her wrists and hands.

At last he said, "Where are you going to go? What's going to become of you?"

"I don't know."

Her words gave him courage. He said, in a rush, "Stay with me. Let me take care of you. You're—you make me feel that I belong to somebody. I never felt that before. Perhaps your power will come back. Why, you're immortal! You can't get old and—You'll be young again. Won't you please stay?"

She looked at him, and he thought there was gratitude in her bright brow. Slowly she inclined her head. For an instant he felt dizzy, sickened with incredulity as he realized that the foam-born daughter of Zeus had come to live with him.

THOSE were strange days. In the morning Paul would go to the liquor store and buy brandy for her, the best he could afford. It was the only human thing he had found that she could eat or drink. When he got back she would be sitting in the armchair, bathed and dressed, but quite exhausted. He would open the brandy. He never drank any of it himself; it was for her.

As the day wore on, her cheeks

would be less white. He would sit on the floor beside her, quietly, in a voiceless communion. Now and again she would stretch out her divine hand and lay it on his human head. Then vast shining shapes would move through his mind. Once she told him a story, with long pauses between the words, about Achilles and the fighting around Troy. It was as if she unfolded some bright embroidered tapestry.

At night she slept in his bed and he on a blanket on the floor beside it. He would wake two or three times during the night to make sure that she was covered and sleeping quietly. In the darkness her body gave out a faint, pale, lovely silver light. He would kneel beside the bed watching, trembling with awe. Once he thought, "She owns me. Whether she wants to or not. I'm her dog."

He hoped she was getting better. He didn't know. He wanted it too much to trust his own hope.

On the sixth day his money ran out. The brandy he had been buying cost more than the sherry he was accustomed to drink, and his pension check would not come until the end of the month. He stood shivering in front of the liquor store, thinking of cheaper brandy and looking up absently at the sky. It was a dull slate blue; he thought it would snow before night. Then he turned and walked

four blocks to the Blucher Laboratories and sold them a pint of his blood.

THE nurse who took the blood was doubtful about him. She weighed him, and then said he was too thin. But Paul stood looking at her silently, and at last she pursed her lips and shrugged. He was permitted to lie down on the padded bench and have a vein in his upper arm opened. He went out with eight dollars in his hand.

He bought the bottle of brandy at the package goods store and started home with it. His footsteps were slow. He was feeling, not nauseated (the nurse had insisted on his swallowing coffee and a doughnut before she would dismiss him), but remote from himself and weak. His heart seemed to pound lightly and hollowly. The nurse had been right to be dubious over him.

It took him five minutes or so to get up the stairs. He had to stop often to rest. When he opened the door, she was sitting in the armchair. He looked at her with the objectivity induced by his feeling of exhaustion and remoteness. She was very pale. Paler, he thought, than she had been yesterday.

He opened the brandy and brought it to her in a glass. As she took it, she said, "You look tired, Paul. Do you have a girl some-

where? You were gone a long time."

For a moment he could only stare at her. A sudden bright indignation cut through the fog in his mind. Did she think, could she possibly think, that he, who sat by her feet in the day, who slept on the floor beside her in the night, could . . . could . . . ? Then the tenderness and benignity in her face reached him, and he saw the concern for him that had made her ask.

He looked away from her. "No, nothing like that. I'm . . . not so young any more," he answered, half in apology.

"Young!" For the first time he heard her laugh. The sound was like the sudden flash of sunlight on a wave. "Why, you're nothing but a boy. You don't know how young you are. Sit down by me on the floor, Paul."

As he obeyed, she put out one hand and tipped his face up to her. He shuddered all over at the touch. She studied him with her translucent golden eyes. Then she nodded and smiled.

"No, you're not handsome," she said, almost teasingly. "But . . . I cannot have lost all my power." For a moment her face changed. He saw that she was afraid. "I'll take care of you, oh, I know I can. Paul, the girls are going to be nice to you."

"That's good," he said awk-

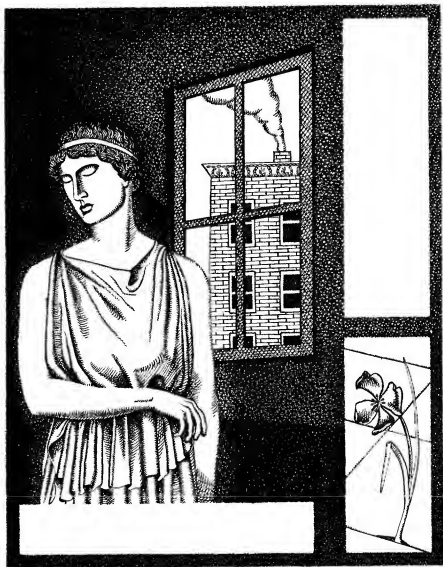
wardly. In a flash of wry humor he thought, "She's optimistic because she has succeeded with even more unpromising human material than I am." Then the gentleness in her face shook him to the heart, and he repeated more warmly, "That's good."

She put her white hand over her eyes. "I never scorned human needs. Or human love."

ON THE next day she questioned him lightly, trying to hide her disappointment when he replied with negatives. The day after that she asked him more doubtfully; he saw that her self-confidence was going.

On the third day he excused himself at twilight and went out to walk in the street. Shivering, he paced up and down before the liquor store, the hock shop, the grocery (his overcoat had gone long ago), and invented the details of an amorous adventure. When his imagination was satisfied, he looked at the clock in the window of the second liquor store, and was dismayed to find that less than half an hour had passed. What he was going to say had happened couldn't have happened in under an hour; he had some forty minutes to kill. He walked back and forth, rehearsing his story and shivering. Then he ran up the stairs to her.

The light had not been turned on. Except for the pale, pale ra-



diance from her body, the room was in darkness. He knelt by her feet, glad to be invisible, and told her his lies.

Once or twice she interrupted to put a question. He could feel that she was smiling. "So," she said, when he had come to the limits of his invention, "isn't it as I told you? Paul, didn't I tell you I'd take care of you?" There was a triumph in her voice.

"Yes. Thank you for it."

"And did you please *her*?" she asked after a moment, more gravely. "So that she gave you that final pleasure, of seeing a woman turned into more than a woman in your arms? I hope it was like that."

"It was like that."

The faint light of her body had grown stronger; he could perceive even in the dark that pleasure was making her smile. He was glad that he had lied to her. When he got to his feet and switched on the room's one weak bulb, he saw that her face was alive with her delight.

AFTER that he told her many lies. He would walk up and down in the dusk, shivering uncontrollably as the year advanced and the winter grew more cold, and contrive stories of warm, perfumed rooms, wide couches, and girls with satin thighs. He got to know every watch and camera behind the metal lattice of the hock

shop, every bottle in the window of the liquor stores. He thought none of the merchants in his street changed their displays often enough.

Once or twice he took twenty cents from the change in his pockets and went to the picture house on the corner, out of the cold, to sit through banging westerns and dramas of wealthy society, but usually he could not afford them, and after the third time he came the nurse at the Blucher Laboratories had refused to take any more blood from him, saying scoldingly, "What you need is less sherry to drink and more to eat. Why is it that you people don't ever want to eat?"—so he no longer had that source of revenue.

He bought freesias with two dollars of the money he got for the last pint of blood. He took the flowers in their green wrapper up the stairs to her, telling her he'd had a windfall, things were looking up for him. She received his story as yet another evidence of her success in taking care of him. The room was no more full of the delicate perfume of the flowers than it was of the silver reflections of her smiling lips and the movements of her hands.

He was always afraid that she would see past his lies to the cold, dirty reality, but somehow—whether because she had lost most

of her power, or because it had not ever extended in that direction—she never did. She accepted his stories unquestioningly.

YET, as the days passed and her body grew always lighter and more tenuous, it came to him that she was dying. His lies and his care could not help her. There were times when he thought she rallied, when he would permit himself to hope.

On Thursday he had no money left at all. He went to the laboratories. The nurse frowned at him through the window and shook her head menacingly. He went to the liquor store nearest the corner and stood about, fingering bottles, until the proprietor's back was turned. Then he put a pint of brandy in his pocket and walked out with it. She drank it slowly, growing a little less bloodless. Thursday was a good day.

Friday was bright and clear. Last night the moon had been full; it had snowed all night. The room had been full of the snow's cold radiance. He had wakened several times to look at her in the night. Now, in the hard light of morning, he could hardly see her. She was like a pale flame in the sun.

"How are you?" he asked anxiously as he prepared to leave her.

"Oh, I'm much better this morning, Paul. I almost think my power

is coming back." She smiled at him. She seemed to believe it; he felt a tiny jet of hope as he went down the stair.

He had decided to try it again. He entered the liquor store and walked toward the back, where the brandy was. He waited carefully; then his hand went out. With shattering abruptness the proprietor spoke to him.

"Look here, Minton, you can't get away with this," he said sternly. "I saw you take that bottle yesterday, and I didn't say anything. You've been a good customer, and there are times when a man has to have a pint. But I'm not going to let you do it today too. A whole pint of brandy—what did you do with it?"

"I—" Paul's body had begun to shake.

"Well, I guess I know. You ought to've stuck to that sherry wine. Brandy costs too much. And there's no use your trying to lift a pint from Jake, at the other store. I told him about you."

PAUL went out. The snow had been cleared from the sidewalks, but it still lay in the street. He bit his fingers desperately. Then he went to the laboratories and, despite the nurse's hostile frown, went in.

"Please," he said, "I've just got to—please—"

She looked at him for a long

time, frowning and shaking her head. But at last she shrugged her shoulders, saying angrily, "Well, if you want to kill yourself!" and let him lie down on the bench. He thought she did not take quite the full pint.

He was slow getting back to his room. He had the brandy in his pocket, but he was dizzy, light-headed, sick. The stairs had never seemed so long.

When he opened the door, she was standing beside the bed. He looked at her foolishly. "Did you see it?" she asked.

"See what?" he answered stupidly. Her voice, for all its excitement, had sounded remote and very weak.

"Why, what I made happen in the street. Didn't I tell you, Paul, that my power was coming back?" She smiled at him in triumph, but her body seemed to waver in the air.

"Oh. Yes, I—"

"This morning I felt so much better. I thought I would try. And I succeeded. Surely you must have seen the masses of flowers near the window? Go over to the window and look out."

SHE was growing frightened. He obeyed her. He raised the sash and peered out dizzily.

For a moment he could see nothing. His eyes blurred; he had to blink them again and again. Then

he made out, in the snow beneath the window, a tiny, tiny pale pink flower.

"Yes, you are right. Your power has come back to you. It is—a miracle. The whole street is full of flowers."

Her face grew divine with laughter. She held out her hands toward him, laughing, and he reached out for them. But the unearthly, beautiful body had grown as tenuous as smoke; he could not touch her. Still she smiled at him. For a moment a most wonderful perfume hovered in the air. There was a rainbow iridescence. Then she disappeared.

He stared stupidly at the spot where she had been. It was impossible; he would not believe it. But, as the moments passed and the room remained empty and silent, he realized that it had happened. He was alone now. She was gone; she had left him. Aphrodite was dead.

She had left him. He was all alone. And now—he tried to laugh as the irony came to him, but weeping choked him—and now, whose dog was he? The brandy was in his pocket, unopened. He would not have to sell any more blood for her. Who was going to take care of him?

Margaret St. Clair

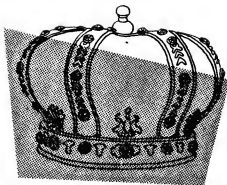
IT WAS raining and getting dark. Sheets of water blew along the row of pumps at the edge of the filling station; the trees across the highway bent against the wind.

Shadrach Jones stood just inside the doorway of the little building, leaning against an oil drum. The door was open and gusts of rain blew in onto the wood floor. It was late; the sun had set, and the air was turning cold. Shadrach reached into his coat and brought out a cigar. He bit the end off it and lit it carefully, turning away from the door. In the gloom, the cigar burst into life, warm and glowing. Shadrach took a deep draw. He buttoned his coat around him and stepped out onto the pavement.

"Darn," he said. "What a night!" Rain buffeted him, wind blew at him. He looked up and down the highway, squinting. There were no cars in sight. He shook his head, locked up the gasoline pumps.

He went back into the building and pulled the door shut behind him. He opened the cash register and counted the money he'd taken in during the day. It was not much.

Not much, but enough for one old man. Enough to buy him tobacco and firewood and magazines, so that he could be comfortable as he waited for the occasional cars to come by. Not very many



The King

cars came along the highway any more. The highway had begun to fall into disrepair; there were many cracks in its dry, rough surface, and most cars preferred to take the big state highway that ran beyond the hills. There was nothing in Derryville to attract them, to make them turn toward it. Derryville was a small town, too small to bring in any of the major industries, too small to be very important to anyone. Sometimes hours went by without—

Shadrach tensed. His fingers closed over the money. From outside came a sound, the melodic ring of the signal wire stretched along the pavement.

Dinggg!

Illustrated by BARTH

Some men

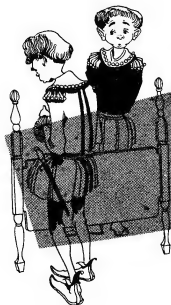
have greatness thrust upon them

... but for Shadrach Jones,

it was royalty!

of the ELVES

By PHILIP K. DICK



SHADRACH dropped the money into the till and pushed the drawer closed. He stood up slowly and walked toward the door, listening. At the door, he snapped off the light and waited in the darkness, staring out.

He could see no car there. The rain was pouring down, swirling with the wind; clouds of mist moved along the road. And something was standing beside the pumps.

He opened the door and stepped out. At first, his eyes could make nothing out. Then the old man swallowed uneasily.

Two tiny figures stood in the rain, holding a kind of platform between them. Once, they might have been gaily dressed in bright garments, but now their clothes hung limp and sodden, dripping in the rain. They glanced half-heartedly at Shadrach. Water streaked their tiny faces, great drops of water. Their robes blew about them with the wind, lashing and swirling.

On the platform, something stirred. A small head turned wearily, peering at Shadrach. In the dim light, a rain-streaked helmet glinted dully.

"Who are you?" Shadrach said.

The figure on the platform raised itself up. "I'm the King of the Elves and I'm wet."

Shadrach stared in astonishment.

"That's right," one of the bearers said. "We're all wet."

A small group of elves came straggling up, gathering around their king. They huddled together forlornly, silently.

"The King of the Elves," Shadrach repeated. "Well, I'll be darned."

Could it be true? They were very small, all right, and their dripping clothes were strange and oddly colored.

But *Elves*?

"I'll be darned. Well, whatever you are, you shouldn't be out on a night like this."

"Of course not," the king murmured. "No fault of our own. No fault . . ." His voice trailed off into a choking cough. The Elf soldiers peered anxiously at the platform.

"Maybe you better bring him inside," Shadrach said. "My place is up the road. He shouldn't be out in the rain."

"Do you think we like being out on a night like this?" one of the bearers muttered. "Which way is it? Direct us."

Shadrach pointed up the road. "Over there. Just follow me. I'll get a fire going."

He went down the road, feeling his way onto the first of the flat stone steps that he and Phineas Judd had laid during the summer. At the top of the steps, he looked back. The platform was coming

slowly along, swaying a little from side to side. Behind it, the Elf soldiers picked their way, a tiny column of silent dripping creatures, unhappy and cold.

"I'll get the fire started," Shadrach said. He hurried them into the house.

WEARILY, the Elf King lay back against the pillow. After sipping hot chocolate, he had relaxed and his heavy breathing sounded suspiciously like a snore.

Shadrach shifted in discomfort.

"I'm sorry," the Elf King said suddenly, opening his eyes. He rubbed his forehead. "I must have drifted off. Where was I?"

"You should retire, Your Majesty," one of the soldiers said sleepily. "It is late and these are hard times."

"True," the Elf King said, nodding. "Very true." He looked up at the towering figure of Shadrach, standing before the fireplace, a glass of beer in his hand. "Mortal, we thank you for your hospitality. Normally, we do not impose on human beings."

"It's those Trolls," another of the soldiers said, curled up on a cushion of the couch.

"Right," another soldier agreed. He sat up, groping for his sword. "Those reeking Trolls, digging and croaking—"

"You see," the Elf King went on, "as our party was crossing

from the Great Low Steps toward the Castle, where it lies in the hollow of the Towering Mountains—"

"You mean Sugar Ridge," Shadrach supplied helpfully.

"The Towering Mountains. Slowly we made our way. A rain storm came up. We became confused. All at once a group of Trolls appeared, crashing through the underbrush. We left the woods and sought safety on the Endless Path—"

"The highway. Route Twenty."

"So that is why we're here." The Elf King paused a moment. "Harder and harder it rained. The wind blew around us, cold and bitter. For an endless time we toiled along. We had no idea where we were going or what would become of us."

The Elf King looked up at Shadrach. "We knew only this: Behind us, the Trolls were coming, creeping through the woods, marching through the rain, crushing everything before them."

He put his hand to his mouth and coughed, bending forward. All the Elves waited anxiously until he was done. He straightened up.

"It was kind of you to allow us to come inside. We will not trouble you for long. It is not the custom of the Elves—"

Again he coughed, covering his face with his hand. The Elves drew toward him apprehensively. At last the king stirred. He sighed.

"What's the matter?" Shadrach asked. He went over and took the cup of chocolate from the fragile hand. The Elf King lay back, his eyes shut.

"He has to rest," one of the soldiers said. "Where's your room? The sleeping room."

"Upstairs," Shadrach said. "I'll show you where."

LATE that night, Shadrach sat by himself in the dark, deserted living room, deep in meditation. The Elves were asleep above him, upstairs in the bedroom, the Elf King in the bed, the others curled up together on the rug.

The house was silent. Outside, the rain poured down endlessly, blowing against the house. Shadrach could hear the tree branches slapping in the wind. He clasped and unclasped his hands. What a strange business it was—all these Elves, with their old, sick king, their piping voices. How anxious and peevish they were!

But pathetic, too; so small and wet, with water dripping down from them, and all their gay robes limp and soggy.

The Trolls—what were they like? Unpleasant and not very clean. Something about digging, breaking and pushing through the woods . . .

Suddenly, Shadrach laughed in embarrassment. What was the matter with him, believing all this?

He put his cigar out angrily, his ears red. What was going on? What kind of joke was this?

Elves? Shadrach grunted in indignation. Elves in Derryville? In the middle of Colorado? Maybe there were Elves in Europe. Maybe in Ireland. He had heard of that. But here? Upstairs in his own house, sleeping in his own bed?

"I've heard just about enough of this," he said. "I'm not an idiot, you know."

He turned toward the stairs, feeling for the banister in the gloom. He began to climb.

Above him, a light went on abruptly. A door opened.

Two Elves came slowly out onto the landing. They looked down at him. Shadrach halted halfway up the stairs. Something on their faces made him stop.

"What's the matter?" he asked hesitantly.

They did not answer. The house was turning cold, cold and dark, with the chill of the rain outside and the chill of the unknown inside.

"What is it?" he said again. "What's the matter?"

"The king is dead," one of the Elves said. "He died a few moments ago."

Shadrach stared up, wide-eyed. "He did? But—"

"He was very old and very tired." The Elves turned away, going back into the room, slowly

and quietly shutting the door.

Shadrach stood, his fingers on the banister, hard, lean fingers, strong and thin.

He nodded his head blankly.

"I see," he said to the closed door. "He's dead."

THE Elf soldiers stood around him in a solemn circle. The living room was bright with sunlight, the cold white glare of early morning.

"But wait," Shadrach said. He plucked at his necktie. "I have to get to the filling station. Can't you talk to me when I come home?"

The faces of the Elf soldiers were serious and concerned.

"Listen," one of them said. "Please hear us out. It is very important to us."

Shadrach looked past them. Through the window he saw the highway, steaming in the heat of day, and down a little way was the gas station, glittering brightly. And even as he watched, a car came up to it and honked thinly, impatiently. When nobody came out of the station, the car drove off again down the road.

"We beg you," a soldier said.

Shadrach looked down at the ring around him, the anxious faces, scored with concern and trouble. Strangely, he had always thought of Elves as carefree beings, flitting without worry or sense—

"Go ahead," he said. "I'm lis-

tening." He went over to the big chair and sat down. The Elves came up around him. They conversed among themselves for a moment, whispering, murmuring distantly. Then they turned toward Shadrach.

The old man waited, his arms folded.

"We cannot be without a king," one of the soldiers said. "We could not survive. Not these days."

"The Trolls," another added. "They multiply very fast. They are terrible beasts. They're heavy and ponderous, crude, bad-smelling—"

"The odor of them is awful. They come up from the dark wet places, under the earth, where the blind, groping plants feed in silence, far below the surface, far from the sun."

"Well, you ought to elect a king, then," Shadrach suggested. "I don't see any problem there."

"We do not elect the King of the Elves," a soldier said. "The old king must name his successor."

"Oh," Shadrach replied. "Well, there's nothing wrong with that method."

"As our old king lay dying, a few distant words came forth from his lips," a soldier said. "We bent closer, frightened and unhappy, listening."

"Important, all right," agreed Shadrach. "Not something you'd want to miss."

"He spoke the name of him who will lead us."

"Good. You caught it, then. Well, where's the difficulty?"

"The name he spoke was—was your name."

Shadrach stared. "*Mine?*"

"The dying king said: 'Make him, the towering mortal, your king. Many things will come if he leads the Elves into battle against the Trolls. I see the rising once again of the Elf Empire, as it was in the old days, as it was before—'"

"Me!" Shadrach leaped up. "Me? King of the Elves?"

Shadrach walked about the room, his hands in his pockets. "Me, Shadrach Jones, King of the Elves." He grinned a little. "I sure never thought of it before."

He went to the mirror over the fireplace and studied himself. He saw his thin, graying hair, his bright eyes, dark skin, his big Adam's apple.

"King of the Elves," he said. "King of the Elves. Wait till Phineas Judd hears about this. Wait till I tell him!"

Phineas Judd would certainly be surprised!

ABOVE the filling station, the sun shown, high in the clear blue sky.

Phineas Judd sat playing with the accelerator of his old Ford truck. The motor raced and

slowed. Phineas reached over and turned the ignition key off, then rolled the window all the way down.

"What did you say?" he asked. He took off his glasses and began to polish them, steel rims between slender, deft fingers that were patient from years of practice. He restored his glasses to his nose and smoothed what remained of his hair into place.

"What was it, Shadrach?" he said. "Let's hear that again."

"I'm King of the Elves," Shadrach repeated. He changed position, bringing his other foot up on the runningboard. "Who would have thought it? Me, Shadrach Jones, King of the Elves."

Phineas gazed at him. "How long have you been—King of the Elves, Shadrach?"

"Since the night before last."

"I see. The night before last." Phineas nodded. "I see. And what, may I ask, occurred the night before last?"

"The Elves came to my house. When the old Elf king died, he told them that—"

A truck came rumbling up and the driver leaped out. "Water!" he said. "Where the hell is the hose?"

Shadrach turned reluctantly. "I'll get it." He turned back to Phineas. "Maybe I can talk to you tonight when you come back from town. I want to tell you the rest.

It's very interesting."

"Sure," Phineas said, starting up his little truck. "Sure, Shadrach. I'm very interested to hear."

He drove off down the road.

Later in the day, Dan Green ran his flivver up to the filling station.

"Hey, Shadrach," he called. "Come over here! I want to ask you something."

Shadrach came out of the little house, holding a waste-rag in his hand.

"What is it?"

"Come here." Dan leaned out the window, a wide grin on his face, splitting his face from ear to ear. "Let me ask you something, will you?"

"Sure."

"Is it true? Are you really the King of the Elves?"

Shadrach flushed a little. "I guess I am," he admitted, looking away. "That's what I am, all right."

Dan's grin faded. "Hey, you trying to kid me? What's the gag?"

Shadrach became angry. "What do you mean? Sure, I'm the King of the Elves. And anyone who says I'm not—"

"All right, Shadrach," Dan said, starting up the flivver quickly. "Don't get mad. I was just wondering."

Shadrach looked very strange.

"All right," Dan said. "You don't hear me arguing, do you?"

BY the end of the day, everyone around knew about Shadrach and how he had suddenly become King of the Elves. Pop Richey, who ran the Lucky Store in Derryville, claimed Shadrach was doing it to drum up trade for the filling station.

"He's a smart old fellow," Pop said. "Not very many cars go along there any more. He knows what he's doing."

"I don't know," Dan Green disagreed. "You should hear him. I think he really believes it."

"King of the Elves?" They all began to laugh. "Wonder what he'll say next."

Phineas Judd pondered. "I've known Shadrach for years. I can't figure it out." He frowned, his face wrinkled and disapproving. "I don't like it."

Dan looked at him. "Then you think he believes it?"

"Sure," Phineas said, "Maybe I'm wrong, but I really think he does."

"But how could he believe it?" Pop asked. "Shadrach is no fool. He's been in business for a long time. He must be getting something out of it, the way I see it. But what, if it isn't to build up the filling station?"

"Why, don't you know what he's getting?" Dan said, grinning. His gold tooth shone.

"What?" Pop demanded.

"He's got a whole kingdom to

himself, that's what—to do with like he wants. How would you like that, Pop? Wouldn't you like to be King of the Elves and not have to run this old store any more?"

"There isn't anything wrong with my store," Pop said. "I ain't ashamed to run it. Better than being a clothing salesman."

Dan flushed. "Nothing wrong with that, either." He looked at Phineas. "Isn't that right? Nothing wrong with selling clothes, is there, Phineas?"

Phineas was staring down at the floor. He glanced up. "What? What was that?"

"What you thinking about?" Pop wanted to know. "You look worried."

"I'm worried about Shadrach," Phineas said. "He's getting old. Sitting out there by himself all the time, in the cold weather, with the rain water running over the floor—it blows something awful in the winter, along the highway—"

"Then you *do* think he believes it?" Dan persisted. "You *don't* think he's getting something out of it?"

Phineas shook his head absently and did not answer.

The laughter died down. They all looked at one another.

THAT night, as Shadrach was locking up the filling station, a small figure came toward him

from the darkness.

"Hey!" Shadrach called out. "Who are you?"

An Elf soldier came into the light, blinking. He was dressed in a little gray robe, buckled at the waist with a band of silver. On his feet were little leather boots. He carried a short sword at his side.

"I have a serious message for you," the Elf said. "Now, where did I put it?"

He searched his robe while Shadrach waited. The Elf brought out a tiny scroll and unfastened it, breaking the wax expertly. He handed it to Shadrach.

"What's it say?" Shadrach asked. He bent over, his eyes close to the vellum. "I don't have my glasses with me. Can't quite make out these little letters."

"The Trolls are moving. They've heard that the old king is dead, and they're rising, in all the hills and valleys around. They will try to break the Elf Kingdom into fragments, scatter the Elves—"

"I see," Shadrach said. "Before your new king can really get started."

"That's right." The Elf soldier nodded. "This is a crucial moment for the Elves. For centuries, our existence has been precarious. There are so many Trolls, and Elves are very frail and often take sick—"

"Well, what should I do? Are there any suggestions?"

"You're supposed to meet with us under the Great Oak tonight. We'll take you into the Elf Kingdom, and you and your staff will plan and map the defense of the Kingdom."

"What?" Shadrach looked uncomfortable. "But I haven't eaten dinner. And my gas station—tomorrow is Saturday, and a lot of cars—"

"But you are King of the Elves," the soldier said.

Shadrach put his hand to his chin and rubbed it slowly.

"That's right," he replied. "I am, ain't I?"

The Elf soldier bowed.

"I wish I'd known this sort of thing was going to happen," Shadrach said. "I didn't suppose being King of the Elves—"

He broke off, hoping for an interruption. The Elf soldier watched him calmly, without expression.

"Maybe you ought to have someone else as your king," Shadrach decided. "I don't know very much about war and things like that, fighting and all that sort of business." He paused, shrugged his shoulders. "It's nothing I've ever mixed in. They don't have wars here in Colorado. I mean they don't have wars between human beings."

STILL the Elf soldier remained silent.

"Why was I picked?" Shad-

rach went on helplessly, twisting his hands. "I don't know anything about it. What made him go and pick me? Why didn't he pick somebody else?"

"He trusted you," the Elf said. "You brought him inside your house, out of the rain. He knew that you expected nothing for it, that there was nothing you wanted. He had known few who gave and asked nothing back."

"Oh," Shadrach thought it over. At last he looked up. "But what about my gas station? And my house? And what will they say, Dan Green and Pop down at the store—"

The Elf soldier moved away, out of the light. "I have to go. It's getting late, and at night the Trolls come out. I don't want to be too far away from the others."

"Sure," Shadrach said.

"The Trolls are afraid of nothing, now that the old king is dead. They forage everywhere. No one is safe."

"Where did you say the meeting is to be? And what time?"

"At the Great Oak. When the moon sets tonight, just as it leaves the sky."

"I'll be there, I guess," Shadrach said. "I suppose you're right. The King of the Elves can't afford to let his kingdom down when it needs him most."

He looked around, but the Elf soldier was already gone.

Shadrach walked up the highway, his mind full of doubts and wonderings. When he came to the first of the flat stone steps, he stopped.

"And the old oak tree is on Phineas's farm! What'll Phineas say?"

But he was the Elf King and the Trolls were moving in the hills. Shadrach stood listening to the rustle of the wind as it moved through the trees beyond the highway, and along the far slopes and hills.

Trolls? Were there really Trolls there, rising up, bold and confident in the darkness of the night, afraid of nothing, afraid of no one?

And this business of being Elf King . . .

Shadrach went on up the steps, his lips pressed tight. When he reached the top of the stone steps, the last rays of sunlight had already faded. It was night.

PHINEAS Judd stared out the window. He swore and shook his head. Then he went quickly to the door and ran out onto the porch. In the cold moonlight a dim figure was walking slowly across the lower field, coming toward the house along the cow trail.

"Shadrach!" Phineas cried. "What's wrong? What are you doing out this time of night?"

Shadrach stopped and put his fists stubbornly on his hips.

"You go back home," Phineas said. "What's got into you?"

"I'm sorry, Phineas," Shadrach answered. "I'm sorry I have to go over your land. But I have to meet somebody at the old oak tree."

"At this time of night?"

Shadrach bowed his head.

"What's the matter with you, Shadrach? Who in the world you going to meet in the middle of the night on my farm?"

"I have to meet with the Elves. We're going to plan out the war with the Trolls."

"Well, I'll be damned," Phineas Judd said. He went back inside the house and slammed the door. For a long time he stood thinking. Then he went back out on the porch again. "What did you say you were doing? You don't have to tell me, of course, but I just—"

"I have to meet the Elves at the old oak tree. We must have a general council of war against the Trolls."

"Yes, indeed. The Trolls. Have to watch for the Trolls all the time."

"Trolls are everywhere," Shadrach stated, nodding his head. "I never realized it before. You can't forget them or ignore them. They never forget you. They're always planning, watching you—"

Phineas gaped at him, speechless.

"Oh, by the way," Shadrach said. "I may be gone for some

time. It depends on how long this business is going to take. I haven't had much experience in fighting Trolls, so I'm not sure. But I wonder if you'd mind looking after the gas station for me, about twice a day, maybe once in the morning and once at night, to make sure no one's broken in or anything like that."

"You're going away?" Phineas came quickly down the stairs. "What's all this about Trolls? Why are you going?"

Shadrach patiently repeated what he had said.

"But what for?"

"Because I'm the Elf King. I have to lead them."

There was silence. "I see," Phineas said, at last. "That's right, you *did* mention it before, didn't you? But, Shadrach, why don't you come inside for a while and you can tell me about the Trolls and drink some coffee and—"

"Coffee?" Shadrach looked up at the pale moon above him, the moon and the bleak sky. The world was still and dead and the night was very cold and the moon would not be setting for some time.

Shadrach shivered.

"It's a cold night," Phineas urged. "Too cold to be out. Come on in—"

"I guess I have a little time," Shadrach admitted. "A cup of coffee wouldn't do any harm. But I can't stay very long . . ."

SHADRACH stretched his legs out and sighed. "This coffee sure tastes good, Phineas."

Phineas sipped a little and put his cup down. The living room was quiet and warm. It was a very neat little living room with solemn pictures on the walls, gray uninteresting pictures that minded their own business. In the corner was a small reed organ with sheet music carefully arranged on top of it.

Shadrach noticed the organ and smiled. "You still play, Phineas?"

"Not much any more. The bellows don't work right. One of them won't come back up."

"I suppose I could fix it sometime. If I'm around, I mean."

"That would be fine," Phineas said. "I was thinking of asking you."

"Remember how you used to play 'Vilia' and Dan Green came up with that lady who worked for Pop during the summer? The one who wanted to open a pottery shop?"

"I sure do," Phineas said.

Presently, Shadrach set down his coffee cup and shifted in his chair.

"You want more coffee?" Phineas asked quickly. He stood up. "A little more?"

"Maybe a little. But I have to be going pretty soon."

"It's a bad night to be outside."

Shadrach looked through the window. It was darker; the moon

had almost gone down. The fields were stark. Shadrach shivered. "I wouldn't disagree with you," he said.

Phineas turned eagerly. "Look, Shadrach. You go on home where it's warm. You can come out and fight Trolls some other night. There'll always be Trolls. You said so yourself. Plenty of time to do that later, when the weather's better. When it's not so cold."

Shadrach rubbed his forehead wearily. "You know, it all seems like some sort of a crazy dream. When did I start talking about Elves and Trolls? When did it all begin?" His voice trailed off. "Thank you for the coffee." He got slowly to his feet. "It warmed me up a lot. And I appreciated the talk. Like old times, you and me sitting here the way we used to."

"Are you going?" Phineas hesitated. "*Home?*"

"I think I better. It's late."

PHINEAS got quickly to his feet. He led Shadrach to the door, one arm around his shoulder.

"All right, Shadrach, you go on home. Take a good hot bath before you go to bed. It'll fix you up. And maybe just a little snort of brandy to warm the blood."

Phineas opened the front door and they went slowly down the porch steps, onto the cold, dark ground.

"Yes, I guess I'll be going,"

Shadrach said. "Good night—"

"You go on home." Phineas patted him on the arm. "You run along home and take a good hot bath. And then go straight to bed."

"That's a good idea. Thank you, Phineas. I appreciate your kindness." Shadrach looked down at Phineas's hand on his arm. He had not been that close to Phineas for years.

Shadrach contemplated the hand. He wrinkled his brow, puzzled.

Phineas's hand was huge and rough and his arms were short. His fingers were blunt, his nails broken and cracked. Almost black, or so it seemed in the moonlight.

Shadrach looked up at Phineas. "Strange," he murmured.

"What's strange, Shadrach?"

In the moonlight, Phineas's face seemed oddly heavy and brutal. Shadrach had never noticed before how the jaw bulged, what a great protruding jaw it was. The skin was yellow and coarse, like parchment. Behind the glasses, the eyes were like two stones, cold and lifeless. The ears were immense, the hair stringy and matted.

Odd that he had never noticed before. But he had never seen Phineas in the moonlight.

Shadrach stepped away, studying his old friend. From a few feet off, Phineas Judd seemed unusually short and squat. His legs were slightly bowed. His feet were

enormous. And there was something else—

"What is it?" Phineas demanded, beginning to grow suspicious. "Is there something wrong?"

Something was completely wrong. And he had never noticed it, not in all the years they had been friends. All around Phineas Judd was an odor, a faint, pungent stench of rot, of decaying flesh, damp and moldy.

Shadrach glanced slowly about him. "Something wrong?" he echoed. "No, I wouldn't say that."

By the side of the house was an old rain barrel, half fallen apart. Shadrach walked over to it.

"No, Phineas. I wouldn't exactly say there's something wrong."

"What are you doing?"

"Me?" Shadrach took hold of one of the barrel staves and pulled it loose. He walked back to Phineas, carrying the barrel stave carefully. "I'm King of the Elves. Who—or what—are you?"

Phineas roared and attacked with his great murderous shovel hands.

Shadrach smashed him over the head with the barrel stave. Phineas bellowed with rage and pain.

At the shattering sound, there was a clatter and from underneath the house came a furious horde of bounding, leaping creatures, dark bent-over things, their bodies heavy and squat, their feet and heads immense. Shadrach took one

look at the flood of dark creatures pouring out from Phineas's basement. He knew what they were.

"Help!" Shadrach shouted. "Trolls! Help!"

THE Trolls were all around him, grabbing hold of him, tugging at him, climbing up him, pummeling his face and body.

Shadrach fell to with the barrel stave, swung again and again, kicking Trolls with his feet, whacking them with the barrel stave. There seemed to be hundreds of them. More and more poured out from under Phineas's house, a surging black tide of pot-shaped creatures, their great eyes and teeth gleaming in the moonlight.

"Help!" Shadrach cried again, more feebly now. He was getting winded. His heart labored painfully. A Troll bit his wrist, clinging to his arm. Shadrach flung it away, pulling loose from the horde clutching his trouser legs, the barrel stave rising and falling.

One of the Trolls caught hold of the stave. A whole group of them helped, wrenching furiously, trying to pull it away. Shadrach hung on desperately. Trolls were all over him, on his shoulders, clinging to his coat, riding his arms, his legs, pulling his hair—

He heard a high-pitched clarion call from a long way off, the sound of some distant golden trumpet, echoing in the hills.

The Trolls suddenly stopped attacking. One of them dropped off Shadrach's neck. Another let go of his arm.

The call came again, this time more loudly.

"Elves!" a Troll rasped. He turned and moved toward the sound, grinding his teeth and spitting with fury.

"Elves!"

The Trolls swarmed forward, a growing wave of gnashing teeth and nails, pushing furiously toward the Elf columns. The Elves broke formation and joined battle, shouting with wild joy in their shrill, piping voices. The tide of Trolls rushed against them, Troll against Elf, shovel nails against golden sword, biting jaw against dagger.

"Kill the Elves!"

"Death to the Trolls!"

"Onward!"

"Forward!"

Shadrach fought desperately with the Trolls that were still clinging to him. He was exhausted, panting and gasping for breath. Blindly, he whacked on and on, kicking and jumping, throwing Trolls away from him, through the air and across the ground.

HOW long the battle raged, Shadrach never knew. He was lost in a sea of dark bodies, round and evil-smelling, clinging to him, tearing, biting, fastened to his nose

and hair and fingers. He fought silently, grimly.

All around him, the Elf legions clashed with the Troll horde, little groups of struggling warriors on all sides.

Suddenly Shadrach stopped fighting. He raised his head, looking uncertainly around him. Nothing moved. Everything was silent. The fighting had ceased.

A few Trolls still clung to his arms and legs. Shadrach whacked one with the barrel stave. It howled and dropped to the ground. He staggered back, struggling with the last troll, who hung tenaciously to his arm.

"Now you!" Shadrach gasped. He pried the Troll loose and flung it into the air. The Troll fell to the ground and scuttled off into the night.

There was nothing more. No Troll moved anywhere. All was silent across the bleak moon-swept fields.

Shadrach sank down on a stone. His chest rose and fell painfully. Red specks swam before his eyes. Weakly, he got out his pocket handkerchief and wiped his neck and face. He closed his eyes, shaking his head from side to side.

When he opened his eyes again, the Elves were coming toward him, gathering their legion together again. The Elves were disheveled and bruised. Their golden armor was gashed and torn. Their hel-



mets were bent or missing. Most of their scarlet plumes were gone. Those that still remained were drooping and broken.

But the battle was over. The war was won. The Troll hordes had been put to flight.

SHADRACH got slowly to his feet. The Elf warriors stood around him in a circle, gazing up at him with silent respect. One of them helped steady him as he put his handkerchief away in his pocket.

"Thank you," Shadrach murmured. "Thank you very much."

"The Trolls have been defeated," an Elf stated, still awed by what had happened.

Shadrach gazed around at the Elves. There were many of them, more than he had ever seen before. All the Elves had turned out for the battle. They were grim-faced, stern with the seriousness of the moment, weary from the terrible struggle.

"Yes, they're gone, all right," Shadrach said. He was beginning to get his breath. "That was a close call. I'm glad you fellows came when you did. I was just about finished, fighting them all by myself."

"All alone, the King of the Elves held off the entire Troll army," an Elf announced shrilly.

"Eh?" Shadrach said, taken aback. Then he smiled. "That's

true, I *did* fight them alone for a while. I *did* hold off the Trolls all by myself. The whole darn Troll army."

"There is more," an Elf said.

Shadrach blinked. "More?"

"Look over here, O King, mightiest of all the Elves. This way. To the right."

The Elves led Shadrach over.

"What is it?" Shadrach murmured, seeing nothing at first. He gazed down, trying to pierce the darkness. "Could we have a torch over here?"

Some Elves brought little pine torches.

There, on the frozen ground, lay Phineas Judd, on his back. His eyes were blank and staring, his mouth half open. He did not move. His body was cold and stiff.

"He is dead," an Elf said solemnly.

Shadrach gulped in sudden alarm. Cold sweat stood out abruptly on his forehead. "My gosh! My old friend! What have I done?"

"You have slain the Great Troll."

Shadrach paused.

"I *what*?"

You have slain the Great Troll, leader of all the Trolls."

"This has never happened before," another Elf exclaimed excitedly. "The Great Troll has lived for centuries. Nobody imagined he could die. This is our most

historic moment."

All the Elves gazed down at the silent form with awe, awe mixed with more than a little fear.

"Oh, go on!" Shadrach said. "That's just Phineas Judd."

But as he spoke, a chill moved up his spine. He remembered what he had seen a little while before, as he stood close by Phineas, as the dying moonlight crossed his old friend's face.

"Look." One of the Elves bent over and unfastened Phineas's blue-serge vest. He pushed the coat and vest aside. "See?"

Shadrach bent down to look.

He gasped.

UNDERNEATH Phineas Judd's blue-serge vest was a suit of mail, an encrusted mesh of ancient, rusting iron, fastened tightly around the squat body. On the mail stood an engraved insignia, dark and time-worn, embedded with dirt and rust. A moldering half-obliterated emblem. The emblem of a crossed owl leg and toadstool.

The emblem of the Great Troll.

"Golly," Shadrach said. "And I killed him."

For a long time he gazed silently down. Then, slowly, realization began to grow in him. He straightened up, a smile forming on his face.

"What is it, O King?" an Elf piped.

"I just thought of something," Shadrach said. "I just realized that—that since the Great Troll is dead and the Troll army has been put to flight—"

He broke off. All the Elves were waiting.

"I thought maybe I—that is, maybe if you don't need me any more—"

The Elves listened respectfully. "What is it, Mighty King? Go on."

"I thought maybe now I could go back to the filling station and not be king any more." Shadrach glanced hopefully around at them. "Do you think so? With the war over and all. With him dead. What do you say?"

For a time, the Elves were silent. They gazed unhappily down at the ground. None of them said anything. At last they began moving away, collecting their banners and pennants.

"Yes, you may go back," an Elf said quietly. "The war is over. The Trolls have been defeated. You may return to your filling station, if that is what you want."

A flood of relief swept over Shadrach. He straightened up, grinning from ear to ear. "Thanks! That's fine. That's really fine. That's the best news I've heard in my life."

He moved away from the Elves, rubbing his hands together and blowing on them.

"Thanks an awful lot." He

grinned around at the silent Elves. "Well, I guess I'll be running along, then. It's late. Late and cold. It's been a hard night. I'll—I'll see you around."

The Elves nodded silently.

"Fine. Well, good night." Shadrach turned and started along the path. He stopped for a moment, waving back at the Elves. "It was quite a battle, wasn't it? We really licked them." He hurried on along the path. Once again he stopped, looking back and waving. "Sure glad I could help out. Well, good night!"

One or two of the Elves waved, but none of them said anything.

SHADRACH Jones walked slowly toward his place. He could see it from the rise, the highway that few cars traveled, the filling station falling to ruin, the house that might not last as long as himself, and not enough money coming in to repair them or buy a better location.

He turned around and went back.

The Elves were still gathered there in the silence of the night. They had not moved away.

"I was hoping you hadn't gone," Shadrach said, relieved.

"And we were hoping you

would not leave," said a soldier.

Shadrach kicked a stone. It bounced through the tight silence and stopped. The Elves were still watching him.

"Leave?" Shadrach asked. "And me King of the Elves?"

"Then you will remain our king?" an Elf cried.

"It's a hard thing for a man of my age to change. To stop selling gasoline and suddenly be a king. It scared me for a while. But it doesn't any more."

"You will? You *will*?"

"Sure," said Shadrach Jones.

The little circle of Elf torches closed in joyously. In their light, he saw a platform like the one that had carried the old King of the Elves. But this one was much larger, big enough to hold a man, and dozens of the soldiers waited with proud shoulders under the shafts.

A soldier gave him a happy bow. "For you, Sire."

Shadrach climbed aboard. It was less comfortable than walking, but he knew this was how they wanted to take him to the Kingdom of the Elves.

Philip K. Dick

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